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**Title:** Stating the obvious : Celan - Beckett - Nauman

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**Citation style:** Masłoń Sławomir. (2012). Stating the obvious : Celan - Beckett - Nauman. Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



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SLAWOMIR MASŁON

STATING THE OBVIOUS:

Celan  
Beckett  
Nauman



Starting

the

OnVids

**Stating the Obvious:  
Celan – Beckett – Nauman**

*For Joanna Szymańska and Andrzej Przywara*



NR 2950

Sławomir Masłoń

# Stating the Obvious: Celan – Beckett – Nauman



Editor of the Series: Historia Literatur Obcych  
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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David Schauffler for helping me to give shape to the final form of this book.

## Introduction

In his *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton writes that people read books because it is pleasurable. This, from a certain perspective, may be considered to be an obvious statement. Yet this formulation, in all its perversity (it is definitely not a declaration of innocence), is clearly making up for a more fundamental evasion which is never addressed directly. Making the point that literature is “any kind of writing that for some reason or another somebody values highly” (specifying later that it is not just a matter of personal taste but general valuation, and, because of that, a question of the prevailing ideology),<sup>1</sup> Eagleton also has to claim that at a particular time literature is assigned a particular task by a given community, a task that may change with a shift of a paradigm but which is specific and traceable notwithstanding. Therefore, if we speak in “essentialist” terms, the question “what is literature?” cannot be answered because – since “literature” is an empty term – the question has no meaning. (This is, of course, what Eagleton is aiming at: “What Is Literature?” is the title of the introduction from which the above quotation is taken.) But if this question makes no sense, there is another one that does, within the same framework: what is (the task or meaning of) literature, or more generally art, *today*? Surely, one cannot see Eagleton agreeing that it is to provide the general public with ever new ways of diversion (although there is a certain species of Marxist critic which seems to be quite satisfied with that). After all, this is more than adequately done by all the new technologies that seem to be ousting less conventional messages from the contemporary scene of information processing. There is no denying than the question just asked is difficult, even painful, but this makes it only more urgent and important. To be sure, the discussion that would do full justice to this topic would require a separate work (a very thick one, undoubtedly) and the introduction to a less ambitious piece of criticism is not the place to undertake such a task, but nevertheless these matters have to be briefly addressed because they are of consequence to our further progress.

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 9, 11.

8 The first matter that comes to mind, to stay with Eagleton for now and bearing in mind the authors who are going to be discussed in our work, is a kind of reversal of his original proposition: why is contemporary art (worth its name) “unpleasurable,” that is, why is it so difficult? Why does it pose sometimes intractable problems for understanding and appropriation?

This question brings within the compass of our perspective the complaint voiced in some quarters that there are no more great works of the kind that used to conjure up marvellous worlds of their own, a complaint which is very often accompanied by general hostility to and incomprehension of the practices of contemporary artists (which perhaps results from the refusal to pay any due attention to their work). In short, we come across the whole thematics of the degeneration of art, or its “end.” Leaving aside, for now, the question of the pertinence of such accusations (and they are not completely out of place – as one of the *proponents* of the difficult in art famously stated: “All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage”<sup>2</sup>), first, we have to note that the discourse of the end or exhaustion of art has a very long and respectable history indeed.

We can start with Kant, who speaks about the boundary of art, “a point at which art must come to a halt, as there is a limit imposed upon it which it cannot transcend. This limit has in all probability been long since attained.”<sup>3</sup> After that we arrive at the famous Hegelian remark: “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.”<sup>4</sup> What is meant by this formulation, as it is only too-well known, is that art as an inferior manifestation of the true is superseded by the proper incarnation of the Idea or Spirit which is Hegel’s philosophy. It is this understanding of art (and not necessarily as inferior to philosophy) that conveniently sums up the whole history of western thinking about it (if “western art” is not a redundant expression) from Plato to Heidegger: art as the sensible presentation of the Idea. Yet, in saying “thinking” we do not only mean thinking “proper,” that is, philosophy, but any kind of aesthetic view voiced very often with manifest counter-philosophical purpose – all ideas of art as emotional communication or inspired intoxication find their place within the Hegelian concept. This is possible because the Idea is not the intellectual Idea.

It is neither the ideat (or product) of a notion, nor the ideal of a projection. Rather, the Idea is the gathering in itself and for itself of the determinations of being (to go quickly, we can also call it truth, sense, subject, being itself). The Idea is the presentation to itself of being or the thing. It is thus its inter-

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 367.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicolas Walker, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I, p. 11.

nal conformation and its visibility, or in other words, it is the thing itself as vision/envisioned [*en tant que vue*], where, in French, the word *vue* is taken both as noun (the thing as a visible form) and as adjective (the thing *seen*, *envisioned*, grasped in its form, but from within itself or its essence).<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, art is the *techné mimetike* of the Idea; it makes its ideal intelligibility (Plato's *eidos*) available for the senses – the invisible Form imitates itself as visible. And it is here that the crux of the matter in the discourse of the degradation of art rests: *the world of the Idea is no longer ours*. Yet it is very difficult to change one's deeply ingrained habits. The defunct habit of art is precisely the art of a “great form” which would necessarily mimic the cosmology of its time.<sup>6</sup> But ours is a world that is not a *kosmos*, a world uprooted from the metaphysical principle, and in this sense (but only in this sense) what we are left with is the remains, that is to say, garbage, because there is no principle according to which we could disintricate the filth from the substance, or according to which this intrication could be glossed over.<sup>7</sup> Yet we do not want to understand this: art for us *is* the thing of the past, but in a sense radically different from Hegel's: art for us is no longer art – the naked fact is that art can no longer be understood or “consumed” according to the old patterns of creation and reception. The other side of this fact, however, is that, being altogether too accustomed to the idea of art as intelligibility made sensible, we lack any other concepts of art (other than art as entertainment). Hence the task of the present work. Finding in the works of Paul Celan, Samuel Beckett and Bruce Nauman what seem to be strategies for the destruction of traditional aesthetic values, we try to outline their programs for an aesthetics which would be of a world where views do not add up to one and all-encompassing Image<sup>8</sup> (which is always the figure of reason, that is to say, the emanation of the Idea<sup>9</sup>) and, consequently, where views do not signify in the proper sense of the word, or where they signify nothing but themselves.

Yet the will to signification is strong, almost irresistible – even honest attempts to break away from it end up repeating its gestures in however dissimulated a form. But some important, though tentative, forays beyond the pale have already taken place, although this is precisely the one thing we can say about them: that “they have taken place” – we hesitate to call them successful. The reason they are not successful is easy to grasp if one understands that we cannot speak about them in terms of achievement –

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 89. My introductory remarks are indebted to the discussion of the end of art in this book.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy, *Muses*, p. 84.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy, *Muses*, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> That is precisely why we speak about aesthetics – with the emphatic plural.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion in the chapter on Beckett.

10 this is not what these authors are after. Although their work ought not to be discussed in terms of meaning or signification, it can still be said that they are not interested in overcoming meaning (all scenarios of overcoming are inseparably involved with the values they want to overcome), but in what we might call *the other side of meaning*, its elusive ground and resources.

The appropriate analyses will follow, but a problem that remains to be considered is precisely their very appropriateness. One can ask: when art has crossed the ramparts of the polity of meaning, what can be the task of criticism? Is there any? After all, interpretation is also the product of the “cosmic” society and, from times immemorial, has always dealt in “objective” meanings. So if we cannot, in discussing Celan, Beckett and Nauman, provide meaning in its proper sense, interpretation may seem to be (strictly speaking) impossible. This, however, does not necessarily mean that criticism has nothing to say *about* meaninglessness. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno, clearly referring to Beckett, writes: “The non-objective status of interpretation does not deliver us from it, as though there was nothing to interpret.”<sup>10</sup> And in the famous essay on *Endgame* he adds: “Understanding it can only mean understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning.”<sup>11</sup> But is this not a return to idealist principles? Adorno, trying to interpret the mimetic refusal of the play, seems to be speaking once again about assigning meaning to meaninglessness. This, however, is not exactly true – and the crux of the matter lies in the word “concretely.”<sup>12</sup>

The world of *Endgame* is a world that has been shattered into shards – the frame of reference was destroyed and what both the characters in the play and the interpreter are left with are the concrete particulars of an alarm-clock, toy-dog, ladder, pap, etc. After the stories have come to their end we are left with the concrete materiality of their discourse, with the remainder that remains after thematisation has been exhausted.<sup>13</sup> This, however, does not allow us the metaphysical comfort of meaninglessness because Beckett’s meaninglessness is not absolute (meaninglessness treated as the universal state of things does not essentially differ from the Idea) but is presented to us as a product of the material (that is, incarnated) history of thought: what Beckett does is to demonstrate how meaning defeats itself on the way to signification. Thus Adorno again:

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<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. S. Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 243.

<sup>12</sup> My short discussion of the Beckett-Adorno connection is indebted to Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, “This strange institution called literature: an interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 61.

Beckett's plays are absurd not because of the absence of meaning – then they would be irrelevant – but because they debate meaning. They broach its history. His work is governed by the obsession with a positive nothingness, but also by an evolved and thereby equally deserved meaninglessness, and that's why this should not be allowed to be reclaimed as a positive meaning.<sup>14</sup>

But how can an analysis of such a concrete analysis be performed by the interpreter? Is there a way which would allow us to remain within the realm of theory (the ideal) without leaving behind the material (the contingent)? In the final analysis, there seems to be at least one point of convergence here: the works by Beckett, Celan and Nauman are not only meaningless, they are meaninglessness *organised*.<sup>15</sup> This is precisely the task left to the critic today: the very tracing of the ways in which meaning is dismantled. But that is not all. Although there exists a kind of art that is just babble, that is to say, art (but is it art?) that dismantles meaning in a purely aleatory manner (Adorno calls it irrelevant); a *formal* dismantling can never stop at the sheer negativity of its process. Whenever such an accomplishment takes place, some new formal structures are created whose very organising principle is the deconstruction of old referential frameworks of meaning but which, at the same time, by being accomplished in an organised manner, convert the effort into something that, although it cannot be called utterly positive, at least is not exclusively vapid and disposable. If we want to call the product of such a process meaning, it is not the meaning we used to know; it is something that comes from a territory that is largely foreign to us (mainly because it is not the region of knowledge) and whose topography it is the task of the interpreter to lay out. It is just such a (tentative) topography for the works of Celan, Beckett and Nauman that is undertaken in this work. The task, however, is of a kind in which one can only hint at what one is pursuing. As Adorno writes in an unpublished fragment, entitled “On Metaphysics”:

If the absolute cannot exist without the conditioned, then the conditioned has to be part of the absolute while still remaining conditioned. This agrees perfectly with the feeling (*Lebensgefühl*) that everything in this life is at the same time absolutely insignificant and infinitely meaningful.<sup>16</sup>

This impossible goal of infinite criticism is what is trying to put itself into practise in what follows. We do not have to add that it does so unsuccessfully.

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<sup>14</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 220–221.

<sup>15</sup> Adorno, *Notes*, p. 242.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Alexander García Düttmann, “Integral Actuality,” which is the preface to Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), p. 25.



## Celan: Against the Reason of Figure

“The Meridian,” the speech given by Paul Celan on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960, is the only extended critical statement on the art of poetry written by the poet himself. The meaning of the phrase “the art of poetry” (and whether it has any) is precisely the point of meditation.<sup>1</sup>

First, there is art. But, in Celan’s analyses of Büchner’s plays, this art seems to come to us in the shape of a carnival barker and coated and trousered monkey (*Woyzeck*), a puppet jerked by ropes (*Danton’s Death*) or the admirable automatons announced, in a pompous voice, as “[n]othing but art and mechanics, nothing but cardboard and springs” (*Leonce and Lena*). Celan calls this art “art as we already know it” (M 38), that is, the “iambic” art, art as a thing beautiful, a contraption, shortly speaking: *techne*. Art thus conceived enables Danton, Camille and the rest to discuss its problems and then to die their theatrical death; both in the parlour conversation and at the Place de la Révolution, they “do not lack words [...] artful, resonant words, and they get them out” (M 38). But then comes a disruption, something that goes against the bombast and the artificial (which is art): Camille’s wife, Lucile, in despair, shouts “Long live the king!” “True, it sounds [...] at first like an allegiance to the ‘ancien régime,’” says Celan,

But it is not [...] this is not homage to any monarchy, to any yesterday worth preserving.

It is homage to the majesty of the absurd which bespeaks the presence of human beings. (M 40)

Lucile’s word is then, first of all, a word that “cuts the [puppet] string,” a word that opposes the sententiousness and pathos of the artifice – Celan calls it “a counter-word” – but it is also (and this is probably more important) a word that escapes the terms of art, the word of different status, the one that neither approves the regime nor opposes it (it is a cry of pure despair,

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from “The Meridian” (abbreviated as M) come from: Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986).



- 14 not a political declaration), this is a word that does not *mean* anything.<sup>2</sup> Yet it signifies, but it is a strange signification without signification; a signification of a gesture, an event that Celan calls “a step.” What is more, it is a suicidal word – by saying it Lucile simply kills herself.<sup>3</sup> Celan has a third name for such a word:

This, ladies and gentlemen, has no definitive name, but I believe that this is ... poetry. (M 40)

There is also another meaning to art which Celan finds in another work of Büchner, the unfinished fragment called *Lenz*. Here we also encounter a conversation about art. Talking about art, Lenz (“that is, Büchner”) is “in his element,” but his art is not the art of artifice, or not only that – he contrasts the natural (“life in work [...] was the only criterion in matters of art”) to the “wooden puppets” of “idealism.” But this understanding of art also has its uncanny, artificial side – talking about the beautiful scene he has witnessed, Lenz admits:

Sometimes one would like to be a Medusa’s head to turn such a group to stone and gather the people round it. (M 42)

So, of course, there are two problems here: the problem of representation or the concept of mimesis (which has been accused of perpetrating deception from times immemorial) and the problem of the withdrawal of the artist from his creation; and the latter as the consequence of the former. Lenz, talking about art “had forgotten about himself,” he is estranged from his own “I.” Moreover, the championing of the natural does not avoid the problem of art’s artificiality since the challenge of *techne* is not by-passed in any way because, with the artist’s escape, what is left is precisely the non-humanity of the medium to be perused. Celan comments:

This means going beyond what is human, stepping into a realm which is turned toward the human, but uncanny – the realm where the monkey, the automatons and with them ... oh, art, too, seem to be at home. (M 42–43)

Thus, ultimately, these two concepts of art are not that different since they both find their justification in the realm of the strange, the uncanny. Art is essentially estrangement and that is, for Celan, what calls it into question: this kind of art we cannot take for granted, “for absolutely given” (although we *do* take it for granted). And, as in *Danton’s Death*, Celan finds in *Lenz*

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<sup>2</sup> Lucile’s exclamation is of course a phrase, but Celan speaks about it as a word in the extended sense of an instance of speech.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Catastrophe,” in *Word Traces: Readings of Paul Celan*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 137.

a moment that seems to go beyond art. Lenz (who found his “natural” death in the streets of Moscow) 15

on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January was walking through the mountains [...] only, it sometimes bothered him that he could not walk on his head.

This is how Lenz (“that is, Büchner”) takes his step outside art.

A man who walks on his head, ladies and gentlemen, a man who walks on his head sees the sky below, as an abyss. (M 46)

Therefore Lenz’s step is no longer a word; its meaninglessness is much more radical: it is “a terrifying silence” that “takes his – and our – breath and words away.” Poetry takes place in the abyss, so not only does it not have meaning, it also takes place in a place which actually is not a place. The abyss – is this not an uncanny place too? Surely it is, but Celan proposes that this uncanniness is of a different kind than the uncanniness of art, that in the abyss poetry, *perhaps* (the sentences keep being qualified), after travelling the way of art so far, escapes the Medusa’s head and the automata and in an *art-less* manner sets itself free. Perhaps. So, perhaps, there are two kinds of strangeness next to each other or within each other. But what is the meaning of this sojourn in the abyss? After all, the poem does not stay mute. Celan explains:

But the poem speaks. [...] True, it speaks only on its own, its very own behalf.

But I think – and that will hardly surprise you – that the poem has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the strange – no, I can no longer use this word here – *on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an *altogether other*. (M 48)

As mentioned before, Celan perceives two kinds of strangeness lying “next to each other” (M 47). We should have a closer look at what they seem to be.

## An Excursus on Consciousness

The first strangeness is the strangeness of the puppet and string. That strangeness is inherent in a concept of art derived from a (Cartesian) notion of consciousness which situates itself against the real. The subjective as consciousness is isolated from the objective since both of them, as constituted and finished, resist each other. The objective escapes the subjective comprehension as “wholly inhuman and therefore absolutely closed to

16 subjectivity.”<sup>4</sup> This means that although subject and object seem (but only seem) to depend on one another in their constitution, any kind of communication between them is out of question. Such a model appears to be hidden behind the theory of the so-called “auto-referentiality” of literature. Since the object (nature) is foreign to subjectivity, the claims of mimesis or representation are faulty and subjectivity can only move within the field of its own invention (the automaton). It is the concept of “idle” art, divorced from any kind of general meaning, art as diversion for its own sake. But the two seemingly irreconcilable poles of the impossible communication display suspiciously similar qualities. The objective’s frustration of the subject’s power to comprehend or represent it is guaranteed by the objective being an autonomous and accomplished totality. The subjective is not able to totalise the objective (to incorporate it within the subjective totality), but the objective is nothing essentially other; it has the status of the same kind of totality, it is ontologically the same kind of entity, superior only in the sense of being a “larger” totality, “too big” to be comprehended by the subject, but nevertheless *totalisable*. The subjective’s power of comprehension is frustrated by a superior power (that of the objective) but it is the power of the same order. We are still moving within an (inverted) conception of the limit since the way the objective escapes the limit of the subjective is conceived in a way that takes the conception of limit as its founding principle. The situation brings to mind the famous Hegelian analysis of the “commonsensical” concept of the infinite where infinity is only a negative side or the inversion of the finite. If we claim that there is a gulf between the finite and the infinite, that there is no communication between them, we place the finite next to the infinite and make the former the *limit* of the latter. In such an understanding of infinity, the concept is displayed as limited and therefore finite.<sup>5</sup> Two notions that seem to negate each other, after a closer examination, reveal their sameness. In a similar way, having their root in the concept of limit, the idea of the inaccessible other and the notion of auto-referentiality are both negatively identical with what they seem to escape. They are constituted by the *inversion* of the ideas of the same and of representation respectively; these ideas remain their “bottom” (that is, grounding) side.

But, talking about Lenz and Medusa’s head, Celan does not exclude the human completely:

“One would like to be a Medusa’s head” to ... seize the natural as the natural by means of art! [...]

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Libertson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, ed. Friedrich Nicolai and Otto Pöggeler (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966), § 95, pp. 113–114.

This means going beyond what is human, stepping into a realm which is turned toward the human, but uncanny [...] (M 42–43)

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Here we encounter the already mentioned concept of referentiality or mimesis. The realm is uncanny and strange but not completely foreign to the human as the “in-itself” (the objective) was. This brings us to a later “development” in the theory of consciousness: *a priori* dualism of subject and object, which constituted philosophy in its perennial oscillation between an idealism and a realism (which are complementary), was reduced by Hegel.

The reduction means, first of all, a change of approach to the correlation of subjectivity and objectivity. For Hegel, they are both moments of the same totality that develops itself as the process of its own understanding. Before the subjective and the objective get separated in the movement of dialectics they already belong to each other; they are the same “before” they are different.

[A]n sich Begriff oder auch, wenn man will, Subjektivität und Objekt *dasselbe* seien. Ebenso *richtig* ist aber, daß sie *verschieden* sind.<sup>6</sup>

{[T]he Concept (or even, if one prefers, subjectivity) and the object are *in-themselves the same*. But it is equally correct to say that they are *diverse*.}<sup>7</sup>

and:

Wie allenthalben ist die spekulative Identität nicht jene triviale, daß Begriff und Objekt an sich identisch seien.<sup>8</sup>

{As is always the case, the speculative identity is not the trivial one, that Concept and objectivity are in themselves identical.}<sup>9</sup>

This intricacy has its source in the nature of the real where what is objective (i.e. being) has its subjective moment and what is subjective (i.e. thought) lays claims to objectivity.

The existing thing is bound to possess qualities. It has to be determinate if it is qualitatively distinct from another being. A quality, as excluding other qualities, is a limitation and therefore a negation. But since every quality is what it is only in relation to other qualities, the thing exists in the wholeness of relations with other things. Such an existence, the existence in the sphere of “otherness,” is called by Hegel “being-for-other” (*Anderssein*). But the thing

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<sup>6</sup> Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, § 193, p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic (with the Zusätze)*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), p. 269. In this translation *Begriff* is rendered as “Concept,” instead of more popular “notion.”

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Enzyklopädie*, § 193, p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia*, p. 270.

18 is not only formed from the outside, it is not only the aggregation of relations and qualities; it also exists as this something that makes it this very thing, “being-in-itself” (*Ansichsein*). These two moments cannot be separated for the obvious reason that one enables another.

Es [Etwas] ist Nichtdasein, das auf das Ansichsein als auf sein in sich reflektiertes Sein hinweist, so wie umgekehrt das Ansichsein auf das Sein-für-Anderes hinweist.<sup>10</sup>

{It [something] is negative determinate being which is reflected into itself, just as, conversely, being-in-itself points to being-for-other.}<sup>11</sup>

What makes Being-in-itself possible is that the thing permanently relates to itself. Hegel says that:

Sein im Etwas ist *Ansichsein*. Sein, die Beziehung auf sich, die Gleichheit mit sich, ist jetzt nicht mehr unmittelbar, sondern Beziehung auf sich nur als Nichtsein des Andersseins, (als in reflektiertes Dasein).<sup>12</sup>

{The being in something is *being-in-itself*. Being, which is self-relation, equality with self, is now no longer immediate, but is only as the non-being of otherness (as determinate being reflected into itself).}<sup>13</sup>

Being-in-itself is an intro-flected being, a being that has returned to itself from Being-for-other.<sup>14</sup> Intro-flection, however, has always been perceived as a *subjective* quality.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the dialectic of the thing has also a third “side”:

Determinate being is more than the flux of changing qualities. Something preserves itself throughout this flux, something that passes into other things, but also stands against them as a being for itself. This something can exist only as the product of a process through which it integrates its otherness with its own proper being. Hegel says that its existence comes about through “the negation of the negation.” The first negation is the otherness in which it turns, and the second is the incorporation of this other into its own self.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, ed. Georg Lasson (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1975), I, p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, p. 107.

<sup>13</sup> *Hegel's Science of Logic*, p. 119.

<sup>14</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, p. 107 or *Hegel's Science of Logic*, pp. 119–120.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> Marcuse, pp. 132–133.

Such a process, which Hegel calls “mediation,” creates another subjective moment, since it presents things as, to a certain extent, controlling their development. But there is a reason that explains why the objective possesses some qualities of the subjective. The reason is that in the Hegelian system, reality is the *notion*.

For Hegel, the opposition of Being and Nothingness is a metaphysical fallacy. Since everything in the world is created and then destroyed, the only truth that resides in the real is the truth of becoming.

*Das reine Sein und das reine Nichts ist also dasselbe. Was die Wahrheit ist, ist weder das Sein, noch das Nichts, sondern daß das Sein in Nichts, und das Nichts in Sein – nicht übergeht, – sondern übergegangen ist. Aber ebensosehr ist die Wahrheit nicht ihre Ununterschiedenheit, sondern daß sie nicht dasselbe, daß sie absolut unterschieden, aber ebenso ungetrennt und untrennbar sind und unmittelbar jedes in seinem Gegenteil verschwindet. Ihre Wahrheit ist also diese Bewegung des unmittelbaren Verschwindens des Einen in dem Anderen: das Werden.*<sup>17</sup>

{Pure being and pure nothing are, therefore, the same. What is the truth is neither being nor nothing, but that being – does not pass over but has passed over – into nothing, and nothing into being. But it is equally true that they are not undistinguished from each other, that, on the contrary, they are not the same, that they are absolutely distinct, and yet that they are unseparated and inseparable and that each immediately *vanishes in its opposite*. Their truth is, therefore, this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one in the other: *becoming*.}<sup>18</sup>

Since being and nothingness are one, everything in the world carries in itself their togetherness. This means that every being exists only insofar as it is its own contradiction; being contradictory, it is inclusive of its own negation. To maintain its truth, the thing has to become what it is not and, in order to do that, it has to leave its particularity behind. This means that the truth of something particular exceeds its particularity and, by relation with other things, becomes “a totality of conflicting relations.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore the truth of the real can only be universal. This truth is expressed in the *notion* (*Begriff*).

To common sense, what exists is particular (this was the earliest pre-Socratic intuition) and what is universal is “just” thought. As such it has the status of only the “second-rate” existence or the semblance of existence proper. In this way thought becomes only an indifferent *form* that lacks substantial links with its particular content. Hegel opposes this view:

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<sup>17</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel's *Science of Logic*, pp. 82–83.

<sup>19</sup> Marcuse, p. 124.

[D]ie *Natur*, das eigentümliche *Wesen*, das wahrhaft *Bleibende* und *Substantielle* bei der Mannigfaltigkeit und Zufälligkeit des Erscheinens und der vorübergehenden Äußerung, der *Begriff* der Sache, *das in ihr selbst Allgemeine* ist, wie jedes menschliche Individuum, zwar ein unendlich eigentümliches, das *Prius* aller seiner Eigentümlichkeit, darin *Mensch* zu sein, in sich hat.<sup>20</sup>

{[T]he nature, the peculiar essence, that which is genuinely permanent and substantial in the complexity and contingency of appearance and fleeting manifestation, is the *notion* of the thing, the *immanent universal*, and that each human being though infinitely unique is so primarily because he is a *man*.}<sup>21</sup>

and:

[W]enn wir von den *Dingen* sprechen wollen, so nennen wir die *Natur* oder das *Wesen* derselben ihren *Begriff*, und dieser ist nur für das Denken.<sup>22</sup>

{[T]o speak of *things*, we call the *nature* or the *essence* of things their *notion*, and this is only for thought.}<sup>23</sup>

For Hegel, the universal – and the universal can only be present to thought – not only exists but is also more *real* than the particular:

Die unerläßliche Grundlage, der Begriff, das Allgemeine, das der Gedanke [...] selbst ist, kann nicht *nur* als eine gleichgültige Form, die *an* einem Inhalte sei, angesehen werden. Aber dieser Gedanken aller natürlichen und geistigen Dinge, selbst der substantielle *Inhalt*, sind noch ein solcher, der vielfache Bestimmtheiten enthält und noch den Unterschied einer Seele und eines Leibes, des Begriffs und einer relativen Realität an ihm hat; die tiefere Grundlage ist die Seele für sich, der reine Begriff, der das Innerste der Gegenstände, ihr einfacher Lebenspuls, wie selbst des subjektiven Denkens derselben ist.<sup>24</sup>

{The indispensable foundation, the notion, the universal which is the thought itself [...] cannot be regarded as *only* an independent form attached to a content. But these thoughts of everything natural and spiritual, even the substantial *content*, still contain a variety of determinatenesses and are still charged with the difference of a soul and a body, of the notion and a relative reality; the profounder basis is the soul itself, the pure Notion which is the very heart of things, their simple life-pulse, even of the subjective thinking of them.}<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Hegel's Science of Logic*, p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Hegel's Science of Logic*, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Hegel's Science of Logic*, p. 37.

Since the notion exists only for thought<sup>26</sup> and, at the same time, is also the “pulse” of reality, the objective world is the “result” of some absolute thought that thinks itself. (Hegel calls this thought the Absolute Idea.) This way subjectivity finds itself as being realised in objectivity. It also means that the object is never exterior to thought; they are always already in some kind of concord because the dialectics is not only a method in the sense of an instrument that is applied from the outside, “a means standing on the subjective side by which this side relates itself to the object”<sup>27</sup> [als ein auf der subjektiven Seite stehendes Mittel, wodurch sie sich auf das Objekt bezieht<sup>28</sup>], but is also, and at the same time, the “*substantiality of things*”<sup>29</sup> [*Substantialität der Dinge*<sup>30</sup>], that is, the very way the thing exists and develops itself, and is its aforementioned truth.

But in such a system something gets lost. This orientation on the subjective or, as Celan calls it, “inclination towards the human” also abolishes the possibility of an other, that is, of *alterity* as such. Hegelian reality is a *totality* which is a system of relations in which the interval between the Same and the Other has only a temporary (although necessary) existence before the two terms get subsumed within a larger totalisation. Because the Same depends on the Other to seize itself, such an Other becomes only a moment of the Same. This process poses the Other as the guarantee of the totality: negation (which we have already described as one of the most important terms in Hegelian logic), is always *pure*, which means that there is no *absolute* Other within the system, there is only *nothing* which is a pure abstraction and this purity is precisely what enables it to disappear only to come back on a higher level of totality. Negativity is only “that Same” whose sole purpose is the return to “this Same,” vanishing completely on the way.<sup>31</sup> This understanding of the Other sees it as the *limit* of the Same, the limit that has to be transgressed; which brings us back to the already mentioned concept of the real as being put forward in terms of limits and their destruction.

All these concepts lay behind the familiar, traditional notions of art, notions that are so pervasive in our culture that they are accepted without reservation, without questioning. And here is the place where Celan’s contention lies. He asks:

[M]ay we, like many of our contemporaries, take art for granted, for absolutely given? Should we, to put it concretely, should we think Mallarmé, for instance, through to the end? (M 43–44)

<sup>26</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, p. 14 or *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, p. 827.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, II, p. 487.

<sup>29</sup> *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, p. 826.

<sup>30</sup> Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, II, p. 486.

<sup>31</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, p. 30.



22 The Mallarmé Celan speaks about found beauty as the absolute in Nothingness beyond the world.

\* \* \*

The young Mallarmé started his poetic career with an extremely “subjectivist” attitude; his aim was to describe “not the object itself, but the effect which it produces.”<sup>32</sup> But this radically impressionistic strategy that makes him suppress the external world in favour of its subjective effects soon leads him to abandon sensations altogether. In his essay “Crise de vers” he writes:

Why should we perform the miracle by which a natural object is almost made to disappear beneath the magic waving wand of the written word if not to divorce that object from the direct and the palpable, and so conjure up the pure idea?<sup>33</sup>

Now, by being emptied of sensation, poetry becomes an annihilating force that makes the referential world disappear. The destruction of the world is performed in order to reveal what lies beyond the contingent. What is found beyond the world is beauty understood as the idea purified of content, that is, the idea of Nothingness (*le Néant*). Mallarmé writes:

I am travelling, but in unknown lands [...]; because, after I had found nothingness, I found beauty.<sup>34</sup>

In this sense, Mallarmean art *is* the art of the abyss (we remember Lenz’s step), but the abyss is conceived here in terms foreign to Celan – it is the abyss of non-existence, of the inhuman; because with the purgation of the world subjectivity must go too if poetry is to present what is absolute in an objective way. This kind of writing must be utterly impersonal, since anything subjective would “add” to the purity of the absolute, thereby “diluting” it, destroying it as absolute. In order to write such poetry the poet has to *die*, and it is his death that Mallarmé announces after his famous “crisis”:

My thought has thought itself through and reached a pure idea. What the rest of me has suffered during that long agony, is indescribable. But, fortunately, I am quite dead now.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance 1862-1871*, ed. Henri Mondor (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 137, quoted in Leo Bersani, *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Prose, Poems, Essays, and Letters*, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> Mallarmé, *Selected Prose*, pp. 89–90.

<sup>35</sup> Mallarmé, *Selected Prose*, pp. 93–94.

If a poem is to be pure, the poet’s voice must be stilled and the initiative taken by the words themselves, which will be set in motion as they meet unequally in collision. And in an exchange of gleams they will flame out like some glittering swath of fire sweeping over precious stones, and thus replace the audible breathing in lyric poetry of old – replace the poet’s own personal and passionate control of verse.<sup>37</sup>

But this claim has paradoxical consequences: if the poet relinquishes control over the words as they put themselves together according to their own internal rules (which are the rules of beauty), the meaning of these words ceases to be accessible to the poet. The poem becomes “a structure of words closed above all to the poet himself,”<sup>38</sup> which means that it is necessarily obscure to its own creator.<sup>39</sup>

Mallarmé’s treatment of the word as an object within a system of inter-relations, rather than as a unit of meaning, has yet another consequence – a written or printed page becomes an important means of organising poetical matter in a new way, since on the page (that is, in space) the universe of pure relations can be presented more appropriately than in time (as the spoken word). In such a universe, the lack of “substance” becomes as important as the substance itself; the lack, in a sense, becomes substance – the silence and blank spaces of the page (gratuitous in traditional poetry) gain in importance or, paradoxically, become even more essential than the more “substantial” sides of the poem. In Mallarmean verse,

Everything will be hesitation, disposition of parts, their alterations and relationships – all contributing to the rhythmic tonality, which will be the very silence of the poem, in its blank spaces, as that silence is translated by each structural element in its own way.<sup>40</sup>

Such is the proper way to structurally render the idea of beauty.

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<sup>36</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 105; my discussion of Mallarmé is, in many points, indebted to this book.

<sup>37</sup> Mallarmé, *Selected Prose*, pp. 40–41.

<sup>38</sup> Bruns, *Modern Poetry*, p. 104.

<sup>39</sup> The problem of whether Mallarmé’s theoretical assumptions were accomplished in his poetical practice or whether they can be realised as language at all is, of course, another matter which would demand a separate discussion. To mention only one point, Leo Bersani, in the book already referred to, argues that the accidental nature of most of Mallarmé’s poetry is its essential feature that gets realised in the supplementary nature of the poems’ meaning.

<sup>40</sup> Mallarmé, *Selected Prose*, p. 41.

- 24 Abyss, death, silence, obscurity – all these are familiar notions to Celan's reader. Even the imagery in which aesthetic problems are discussed seems very similar. Mallarmé writes:

[I]f I have fled from the fierce heat of reality and have taken pleasure in cold imagery, it is because for a month now I have been on the purest glaciers of esthetics.<sup>41</sup>

For Celan too, the imagery of cold, snow and ice often serves the purpose of expressing the preferred (or, rather, the only) way poetry should be practised or approached:

WEGGEBEIZT vom  
Strahlenwind deiner Sprache  
das bunte Gerede des An-  
erlebten – das hundert-  
züngige Mein-  
gedicht, das Genicht.

Aus-  
gewirbelt,  
frei  
der Weg durch den menschen-  
gestaltigen Schnee  
den Büsserschnee, zu  
den gastlichen  
Gletscherstuben und -tischen.

Tief  
in der Zeiteinschränkung,  
beim  
Wabeneis  
wartet, ein Atemkristall,  
dein unumstößliches  
Zeugnis.

(G II, 31)<sup>42</sup>

{ETCHED AWAY from  
the ray-shot wind of your language  
the garish talk of rubbed-  
off experience – the hundred-  
tongued pseudo-  
poem, the noem.

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<sup>41</sup> Mallarmé, *Selected Prose*, p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> All quotations of Paul Celan's poetry come from: *Gedichte in zwei Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975); abbreviated as G.

Whirled  
 clear,  
 free  
 your way through the human-  
 shaped snow,  
 the penitents' snow, to  
 the hospitable  
 glacier rooms and tables.

Deep  
 in Time's crevasse  
 By  
 the alveolate ice  
 waits, a crystal of breath,  
 your irreversible  
 witness.

(P 231)<sup>43</sup>

But the contention is fundamental – all these already mentioned approaches (of which Mallarmean aesthetics is, in a way, a handy summary because, starting with extreme subjectivism, it ends up at the seemingly opposite pole – the pole of the Absolute Idea) “take art for granted” and as such make “for difference from the I” (M 44). To be sure, this distance may simply mean the impersonal realm of the aesthetics conceived as being indifferent to world and man and functioning according to its inhuman principles (such as in the realm of Mallarmean beauty), but it seems to us that the matter is much more complicated. In order to investigate it we have to examine what lies behind Celan’s notion of poetry as something different from (but also, perhaps, identical to) art.

\* \* \*

As has already been noted, Celan proposes that apart from the strangeness of art there also exists another strangeness which he associates with what he calls poetry. We have already mentioned two places in Büchner’s work where Celan notes this strangeness: the counter-word uttered by Lucile at the scaffold and Lenz’s silence while walking through the mountains. Lucile’s word is a word that goes against the language of art spoken to the crowd by Danton and the rest of the condemned, the language that distances the speaker from his “I.” Lucile’s word is not pronounced to accomplish anything, it is neither a word of protest nor a word of support; it seems to come from a level different than that of politics. By crying out “Long live the king!” Lucile nevertheless accomplishes something; she manages to commit suicide, the words manage

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<sup>43</sup> If not stated otherwise, all translations of Celan are from: *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press, 1988); abbreviated as P.

26 to kill her, although not straight away. They are the outcry of extreme helplessness, but a helplessness that, paradoxically, remains within the realm of action – although Celan says that Lucile’s word is not a political declaration, this word nevertheless remains within the realm where political declarations are possible and make sense. Faced with the absurdity of the situation, not being able to do anything to change the course of events, Lucile chooses the last thing that is left to her in the general dispossession she is going through. The last thing that belongs to her and over which she still has power is what is considered to be man’s ownmost possibility – her death. My death belongs to me alone since no one can die in my place; being the only possession I cannot be rid of, death becomes (in existentialist thought) the sign of man. When all possibilities are taken away from me, I can still choose my death, I can still die. In this sense, death is always the force I can use, the power I can fall back on. But this interpretation of the counter-word, although going beyond the traditional representational commonplaces (it does not represent, it does not support either side), does not actually leave the realm of the first strangeness as described by Celan. When I appropriate death as power, it is still “the utmost limit of my solitary resolution,”<sup>44</sup> and I stay within the field where death as power is the beginning of the life of mind (Hegel’s dialectics) where death grounds the labour of truth – truth that enables the aforementioned political declarations (it does not matter if they are for or against). The counter-word as an exercise of power does not escape the truth of politics no matter how absurd and human it is.

But Celan is not necessarily wrong in describing Lucile’s cry as something radically other than the language in which truths are measured against each other. Maybe this word sincerely did not want to accomplish anything in the end? Maybe we can try to understand it in a manner other than as an existentialist gesture, the deployment of individual absolute freedom? Let us remind ourselves (as Celan does too) that Lucile is there awaiting the execution of a husband whom she loves. She stands there mad with despair, “out of her depth,” as it is said. Maybe the word that comes to her is not exactly hers? She is undoubtedly in pain, she suffers. Could it be that she loses all initiative and lets the word “suffer onto her”? Perhaps, but if so, does it change her experience in any way?

As Maurice Blanchot points out, suffering is a special order of experience that goes beyond the familiar concept of what experience is. First of all, the essence of suffering is the fact that it is always already beyond measure, “suffering is suffering when one can no longer suffer it, and when, because of this non-power, one cannot cease suffering it.”<sup>45</sup> Pain is something that escapes my control (at least beyond a certain point): I cannot, while suf-

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<sup>44</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “The Great Refusal” in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> Blanchot, “The Great Refusal,” p. 44.

fering, assess my pain; I also cannot intentionally make it go away. But most of all, suffering is suffering because it goes beyond what I am able to suffer – a pain may stay within the boundaries of my resistance (as everybody has a lower or higher tolerance for pain); a pain I can cope with is inconvenient – but suffering starts precisely beyond this measure. I cannot suffer my pain (it is too great to be suffered) and because of that, because I have no power over it, I cannot stop suffering it. But when I lose my power is it still I who suffers? While suffering, one is unable to take any distance from oneself, from the body, from suffering; and if the possibility of forming a unified subject can only be accomplished in the manner in which “I” is constituted against the “outside,” suffering precludes such a relation. Therefore, the one who suffers, “precisely through this suffering, is deprived of this ‘I’ that would make him suffer it.”<sup>46</sup> In pain, one is unable to measure oneself against the outside, one becomes a gigantic body that takes up the whole of the universe, but this body is a scattered one, without a point around which it would be able to unify itself, a body that becomes foreign and *strange*. In this sense the experience of pain, the experience that escapes one’s power to undergo it, can be called *neutral* – there is no subjectivity that goes through it. This experience is also strange because it does not allow any distance between the sufferer and the suffering – this infinite closeness ruins all possible concepts of proximity and so it also becomes infinitely distant. It is closer than close and more distant than distant because the concepts of closeness and distance need a concept of separation to be thought as different. But this “confusion” between close and distant or between outside and inside is not the experience of dispersion in undifferentiation – there *is* someone who suffers and she or he definitely cannot be considered as pure exteriority. In the dimension we are describing, we are not allowed to fall back on the already familiar concept of Nothingness (e.g. in its Mallarmean variety) – here, neither do the opposites annihilate themselves nor are they overcome in the process of *Aufhebung* (Hegel); here, distance is contact while still remaining distant – what is near is intimate without being accessible. This seems to be the experience (which is already the other of experience) of the second strangeness which, according to Celan, lies next to the strangeness of negation, power and art which are “the distance poetry must cover” (M 45) in order to reach itself – the other strangeness, the strangeness of poetry.

In such a land where the poem and the strange dwell, strange encounters take place. This is what Celan says about the poem:

The poem is lonely. It is lonely and *en route*. Its author stays with it.

Does this very fact not place the poem already here, at its inception, in the encounter, *in the mystery of encounter?* (M 49)

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<sup>46</sup> Blanchot, “The Great Refusal,” p. 45.

28 Why is the poem lonely? What kind of encounter is solitary at the same time? Encounter with whom? A moment earlier Celan has written:

Perhaps, I am led to speculate, perhaps an encounter is conceivable between this “altogether other” – I am using a familiar auxiliary – and a not so very distant, a unique close “other” – conceivable, perhaps, again and again. (M 48)

How is solitude possible within such an event?

Having said that within the dimension of poetry the concept of the “I” is no longer operative (because not adequate), we may say that the traditional idea of loneliness or solitude seems to lack ground. Since there is no subjectivity that could be considered as a self-contained whole, the very concept of it being separated from other similar subjectivities does not seem to make sense. But apart from the popular understanding of solitude, which we can call, after Blanchot, “solitude in the world,” one can also think of solitude in its neutral aspect (Blanchot’s “essential solitude”). Here, one is alone as far as the possibility of encountering the constituted other is concerned, but one is also not alone since “[w]hen I am alone, I am not alone. [...] Someone (*Quelqu’un*) is there, where I am alone.”<sup>47</sup> Essential solitude can be explained to be operating at that point in the constitution of the self when the self is seized prior to its integration as the self-sufficient “I” or subjectivity. Someone is the figure of this point. It is the point that pre-dates the distinction between myself and other – it is neither, but, at the same time, has aspects of both; it is their “third instance.”<sup>48</sup> Someone may be described as pre-subjectivity already involved with the other, or, to be even more precise, as whatever stands “between” the self and the other, the you and the me. In this light, Someone seems to be the figure of the aforementioned encounter itself.

But where is the poem’s place in this economy? If it is solitary and *en route* heading “straight for the ‘otherness’[...] which is perhaps vacant and at the same time [...] turned toward it, toward the poem,” (M 48) the poem has to *be* this encounter, the figure of the encounter.

Celan’s poetry is full of presences who are addressed as “you” (*du*) – according to the poet, this pronoun is indispensable for the poem to be worthy of its name. Such a poem “becomes conversation” because “[o]nly the space of conversation can establish what is addressed, can gather it into a ‘you’ around the naming and speaking I.” (M 50) But this *du* is not, in any sense, yet another subject against which I can define myself; it is what covers the distance between me and you, the distance which makes me stick out of myself, reach out of myself, and whose starting place is the experience of pain:

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<sup>47</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude,” in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, p. 49.

Wenn du noch einmal mein Schmerz wärest, dir treu,  
und es käm eine Lippe vorbei, diesseitig, am  
Ort, wo ich aus mir herausreich,

ich brächte dich durch  
diese Straße  
nach vorn.

(G II, 131)

{If you were my pain once again, faithful to yourself,  
and if a lip came past me, mundanely, in  
the place where I stick out of myself,

I would lead you down  
this street  
ahead.}<sup>49</sup>

What happens here goes beyond mere conversation. The one who encounters a lip is actually the one who reaches out of himself, the one who is already ahead of himself as *du*. He is the one who is faithful to language (we can treat “lip” as a synecdoche but also as an import: in Hebrew the word for lip also signifies language), that is, who by means of the poem brings about the encounter, who *as* the poem *becomes* the encounter and in the encounter has the aspects of both *ich* and *du*. Such an entity goes beyond these two personal pronouns and becomes “a wider name.”

ein weiterer Name  
– du, du, beleb dich! –  
muß eine Ziffer  
dulden,

Unzählbarer du:  
um ein Un-  
zeichen  
bist du ihnen allen  
voraus.

(G II, 384)

{a wider name  
– you, you, enliven yourself! –  
must bear  
a number,

Uncountable you:

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<sup>49</sup> The author’s translation.



by a non-  
sign  
you outdistance them  
all.}<sup>50</sup>

It is the name that outdistances all other names because it is the name in which other names, the names that became numbers, find their breeding ground. But these figure-names, the names understood as referential signs, the names that are dead<sup>51</sup> for the encounter, come from the place that goes beyond what is countable or referentially definable. The wider name is the place where the word is not yet a sign, where it is still something more than sign, where some surplus exists in it that makes it more than just an arbitrary referential pointer (a dead sign). There, in the realm that is prior to the realm of definitions, the sign, still overreaching itself in its excess (its non-signification that the light of clear oppositions strips from it), is still alive because ahead of itself.<sup>52</sup> It is ahead as being always outside, in the region where both *ich* and *du* can walk through it.

du auf der Reise zu meinen  
Feuergedanken im Schwarzkies  
jenseits der Spaltworte, durch  
die ich dich gehn sah, hoch-  
beinig und  
den schwerlippigen eignen  
Kopf  
auf dem von meinen  
tödlich genauen  
Händen  
lebendigen Körper.

(G II, 44)

{you on your way to my  
fire thoughts in the black shingle  
on the other side of dividing words, through  
which I saw you walk, long-  
legged and  
your thick-lipped own  
head  
on my body  
alive

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<sup>50</sup> The author's translation.

<sup>51</sup> A concentration camp association (the inmates bearing numbers) is not very far to seek.

<sup>52</sup> This is the region, however, in which both life and death, as well as time and place take on a different meaning; see further.

by dint of my deadly  
accurate hands.  
(P 237)}

The words are dividing but this division only makes for closeness because what divides is also what enables contact. *Ich* and *du* are separated by words but these very same words are what make their absolute separateness impossible because both of them can exist only in words. Therefore what walks through words is the body of both *ich* (body) and *du* (head), the body thick-lipped with language. But it is not the body that grew itself whole. It is the body that is both dead and alive (*tödlich Händen/lebendigen Körper*)<sup>53</sup> and, what is more, it is the body bisected by a chasm.

Sag deinen dich  
bis in die Schluchten hinein-  
begleitenden Fingern, wie  
ich dich kannte, wie weit  
ich dich ins Tiefe stieß, wo  
dich mein bitterster Traum  
herzher beschlief, im Bett  
meines unablösbaren Namens.  
(G II, 44)

{Tell your fingers that  
accompany you down into  
chasms even, how  
I knew you, how far  
I pushed you into the deep, where  
my most bitter dream  
slept with you from the heart, in the bed  
of my undetachable name.  
(P 236)}

*Ich* and *du* figure as one body but a body that is not utterly identical with itself. They perfectly “know” each other but at the same time the deep (*Tiefe*) stands between them. They are both infinitely close and infinitely distant from each other. But they cannot become one another because that would mean that the notions of the inside and the outside have become one and in such a region dispersion would reign, the dispersion that would not allow any movement of terms (as in the universe when entropy has reached its fulfilment). Therefore, *ich* and *du*, although in contact with one another, remain separate. After all, there is the chasm that separates them, and this chasm is precisely what makes them touch each other: the dividing words. But the figure of their encounter is the “ever wider name” mentioned above,

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<sup>53</sup> See further.

32 the name which, although it cannot be definitively pinpointed (because it is not a dead name), is yet undetachable. This name, which hides behind the pronoun *du* in Celan's poetry, seems to be the same name that the pronoun Someone stands for.

Someone is what links me and you and, simultaneously, separates us. But, being such an entity, it cannot abide in the region in which the negative states the rules.

WAS UNS  
zusammenwarf,  
schrickt auseinander,  
  
ein Weltstein, sonnenfern,  
summt.  
(G II, 246)

{THAT WHICH  
threw us together  
startles apart,  
  
a world-boulder, sun-remote,  
hums.  
(P 291)}

The negative, as is claimed by Hegel, is the point at which the life of mind takes its beginning. Within its realm everything becomes clear in the light of reason, and if it is not clear, it is not clear *yet* – since reason develops in the world and *as* the world, the final outcome will be a universal kingdom of light. Mind and word will become perfectly coincident, which also means that in this final point of self-comprehension and freedom everything that was dark or obscure will be wiped out and become just another region of Spirit perfectly transparent to itself.<sup>54</sup> But as we have already seen, this is not a region where Someone, that which simultaneously throws together and startles apart, can abide. Its realm is the sun-remote region where both *ich* and *du* reach towards each other but can only do it with “fingers that accompany you into chasms” (the poem quoted above). This region is the region of night and darkness, the region in which you cannot clearly assess your place and the region in which your sight fails.

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<sup>54</sup> The concept of truth as light, and later reason as light-shedding is, of course, as old as our civilisation. We already have this concept in the metaphor of the Platonic cave and it persists at least as far as Heidegger and his metaphor of *Lichtung* as the place where truth is revealed to a thinking man. A good summary of philosophical uses of the metaphor of light from the beginnings of ancient thought up until the times of Descartes can be found in Hans Blumenberg, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 30–62.

As has already been said, the constitutive distance is not possible in the realm of Someone: what is intimate is, by being closer than any distance, already infinitely distant. Such a region, the region in which nothing could be placed at a distance, ruins the possibility of sight, which is a sense that can work only in the presence of some interval between the one who sees and what is seen; if one is placed too close to some object it becomes ever more out of focus and finally disappears to become nothing but dancing grain. Being at the same time too close and too distant to see anything, the eye becomes blind (in the sense of being no longer of any use) in the region we are trying to approach. Here, the eye, losing all the transparency that it possessed in the world (the world of negation and action), becomes as opaque as the stone; whatever in the eye is of the world is precisely what makes the eye a stone (world-boulder).

Der Stein.  
Der Stein in der Luft, dem ich folgte.  
Dein Aug, so blind wie der Stein.

Wie waren  
Hände,  
wir schöpften die Finsternis leer, wir fanden  
das Wort, das den Sommer heraufkam  
(G I, 164)

{The stone.  
The stone in the air which I followed.  
Your eye, as blind as the stone.

We were hands,  
we baled the darkness empty, we found  
the word that ascended summer  
(P 115)}

But what obscures the world is that which makes one follow the stone, the blind eye. When the world is gone there is still something to follow and this something is precisely that which makes the world disappear.

WAS GESCHAH? Der Stein trat aus dem Berge.  
Wer erwachte? Du und ich.  
Sprache, Sprache. Mit-Stern. Neben-Erde.  
Ärmer. Offen. Heimatlich.

Wohin gings? Gen Unverklungen.  
Mit dem Stein gings, mit uns zwein.  
Herz und Herz. Zu schwer befunden.  
Schwerer werden. Leichter sein.  
(G I, 269)

{WHAT OCCURRED? The boulder left the mountain.  
 Who awakened?  
 You and I.  
 Language, language. Co-earth. Fellow-planet.  
 Poorer. Open. Homelandy.

The course? Towards the unsubsidied.  
 Your course and mine was the boulder's flight.  
 Heart and heart. Adjudged too heavy.  
 Grow more heavy. Be more light.

(P 205)}

What subsists when the world of definitions and distancing is evacuated is language. But the language blind to definitions, this side of language which escapes the world of light by the aforementioned non-sign, the surplus which always exceeds strict referentiality of the word. That which makes for the escape of what is clear (the world) is what exceeds the world (the word). In this sense, the figure of the stone is the figure of the world by indicating what is absent *from* the world (the stone as the absence of the – visible and multiple – world made palpable), yet, at the same time, present *as* the world, as something prior to the constitution of the world – as its source.<sup>55</sup> But the stone is, simultaneously, the figure of language, because language is the ground upon which *ich* and *du* can belong to each other, where they awake to each other, where they can reach for each other *as* other. It is the ground which never subsides, which is never still and where to grow more heavy is only to grow more light. Thus, the stone is truly the wor(l)d-boulder that cannot be seen through. It can only be groped towards with “fingers” that reach for it “down into chasms,” the same fingers and hands that, groping towards *du*, bale the darkness empty finding the word for Someone, that which lies “between” *ich* and *du*, that which in them is their encounter. The metaphor of touch renders this kind of contact closer than any other sensual one since touching, although it presupposes a regional lack of distance in the point of contact, also has to keep that distance in order to remain separate and thus in order not to be scattered in the other. To make the idea that distance and closeness are not different yet irreducible even more clear, Celan, in another poem, speaks of “du, / augenfingrige / Ferne” {you, / eye-fingered / farness} (G II, 288/P 301).

We have already mentioned the fact that Someone is (among other things) the figure of the encounter. Yet, it also brings with it some more sinister associations. When I am alone, Someone is there. So when I am alone I am not there, I am not there as somebody present. Because Someone is the figure of this non-presence, it is neither a person nor any subjectivity; it is what there

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<sup>55</sup> Already Plato claimed that what enables us to see should remain invisible.

is in its pre-subjective state. This means that two negations must fail in order for Someone to appear: the negation which distinguishes self and other and the negation which distinguishes someone from no one.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, when I am alone No one (something that is not yet subjectivity), the impersonal, is there.<sup>57</sup>

Where I am alone, I am not there; no one is there, but the impersonal is: the outside, as that which prevents, precedes, and dissolves the possibility of any personal relation.<sup>58</sup>

No one is the neutral that goes beyond the dimension of interpersonal relations and solitude in the world.<sup>59</sup> But, precisely by being what transcends the world, it also seems to be a figure of death.

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,  
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.  
Niemand.

Gelobt seist du, Niemand.  
Dir zulieb wollen  
wir blühn.  
Dir  
entgegen.

Ein Nichts  
waren wir, sind wir, werden  
wir bleiben, blühend:  
die Nichts-, die  
Niemandrose.

(G I, 225)

{No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,  
no one conjures our dust.  
No one.

Praised be your name, No one.  
For your sake  
we shall flower.  
Towards [also “against”]  
you.

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<sup>56</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, p. 50.

<sup>57</sup> In French the weakness of the second negation (no one/someone) is already present in the word *personne*, which means both “person” (someone) and “no one.”

<sup>58</sup> Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude,” p. 31.

<sup>59</sup> See the previous discussion of suffering in this chapter.

A nothing  
 we were, are, shall  
 remain, flowering:  
 the nothing-, the  
 no one's rose.  
 (P 175)}

To return once more to Hegel; for him death is the hyperbole of the negative, of that which is essential in the world of activity – when death is lacking, Hegel's world comes to a halt. Without death development and progress are impossible. This is the meaning of death we have already encountered in the figure of Büchner's Lucile (as interpreted by Celan): she is able to choose her death. She seems to make a conscious decision to die when life loses meaning for her – rather than live, she prefers to put her person through the experience of annihilation. But, as we have already mentioned, such an understanding of death is strangely myopic; it glosses over what one cannot afford to overlook. First of all, death does not seem to be a personal experience; it undoubtedly approaches, but does it ever arrive? The question seems to be: who is dying his death? Blanchot says:

As long as I live, I am a mortal man, but when I die, by ceasing to be a man I also cease to be mortal, I am no longer capable of dying, and my impending death horrifies me because I see it as it is: no longer death by the impossibility of dying.<sup>60</sup>

To die is to abandon both man and death. I do not die my death as myself, but as always other than myself. In the moment of death I am no longer there to die my death, I am absent from the scene of my extinction; therefore, “properly speaking *I* do not die.”<sup>61</sup> It is impossible to choose one's death because to die is to lose death as accomplishment, as negation. One dies in the region more essential than action, in the region where one is no longer there, when the neutral – in the shape of No one – is there. In this sense, no one performs any action in death (no one conjures the nothing's dust), but, at the same time, it is No one that appears on the scene of dying. We find ourselves moving toward (*entgegen*) No one, but we also find that this movement toward is simultaneously the movement against (*entgegen*) No one. By approaching it, we already are fleeing from death, and this is only possible because “death itself is perpetual flight before death.”<sup>62</sup> We cannot escape the flight as much as we cannot escape its approach; therefore, fleeing *from* death is tantamount to fleeing *into* death. In this under-

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<sup>60</sup> Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell & al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 337.

<sup>61</sup> Blanchot, “The Work and Death's Space,” in *The Space of Literature*, p. 98.

<sup>62</sup> Blanchot, “The Work and Death's Space,” p. 95.

standing, death is no longer negativity that grounds truth, but becomes the neutral par excellence, that which is contaminated by what Blanchot calls “weakness of the negative” (*faiblesse du négatif*). Death is what approaches towards and against itself, what as nothing (as no longer something) always fulfils itself in the approach – as a rose (the no one’s rose) fulfils itself in its bloom.

But why is the one that moulds us from earth and clay called No one? Is the substitution of absence for the presence of Godhead just a simple act of sacrilege? In order to answer this question we have to ask ourselves another one: how can the sacred be approached? First of all, it cannot be rendered in dialectical speech, the speech that serves the stable and finite existences, since that speech, precisely in order to be clear, has to gloss over everything that it cannot define, cannot accommodate into the grid of comprehensible entities. Secondly, the sacred is said to reveal itself in vision. But visionary experience must arrest the flow of language since one cannot enter sight through speech – vision is the very moment when one does not feel like talking, the moment when one prefers to stay mute. Therefore, the language of the sacred cannot be the language of the immediate – it needs some intermediary in order to get across and present itself. But the sacred is actually something that goes beyond presence, it is “presence of what could not be present, presence of the non-accessible, presence excluding or exceeding any present.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore we can say that the sacred is the presence of something more than present, something non-present – the presence of absence. And this is precisely what is being revealed to us in the figure of No one: it is what is never present, what escapes the light of day, what in the interval and as the interval is made to touch us. The sacred, as No one, cannot be grasped directly, it can only be perceived as coming and escaping at the same time; it is what flees before us and never ceases to approach us as fleeing. In this understanding, one cannot speak about the sacred or around it, the sacred has to *be* the word, be the mediating interval (as another figure of No one), although not in the sense that *logos* is commonly understood (as a creative force). Only such language – language that exceeds negation – as truly affirmatory can be the language in which the Sacred (as No one) can be praised.

Death is not only that which cannot be accomplished; it is also something that, without having been accomplished, seems to survive itself. After all is said and done, we are left with something that lacks a place in the world, we are left with the so-called mortal remains. What is there, in the form of a corpse, is neither the person who was alive nor another person nor, finally, some other thing. The one who has died is no longer there, he is no longer

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<sup>63</sup> Blanchot, “The Great Refusal,” p. 38; my brief discussion of the sacred is based on Blanchot’s interpretation of Hölderlin’s *Das Heilige*.



38 present as the dead body; yet there is something left, there is some remnant that cannot help but relate to us the presence of what is no longer there, that makes this absence present. But what does this cadaverous presence have to do with poetry? Celan is clear on this point:

Ein Wort – du weißt:  
eine Leiche.

Laß uns sie waschen,  
laß uns sie kämmen,  
laß uns ihr Aug  
himmelwärts wenden.  
(G I, 125)

{A word – you know:  
a corpse.

Let us wash it,  
let us comb it,  
let us turn its eye  
towards heaven.  
(P 91)}

We have already discussed the relation between the word and the sacred in the shadow of No one as the figure of death, but why this need to be so literal?

The word is, like the corpse, a remainder. When the word is spoken, the thing is placed at a distance. When the meaning is created, the thing is, so to speak, “put to death,” its “thingly” nature is obliterated in order for it to become an intellectual concept, a meaning void of sensual qualities. The meaning is the work of negation in the world. But the word is not just meaning; in its death the thing disappears but also leaves a remainder – the word itself, the word which is not meaning but a “physical” thing, something that in the world indicates the presence (the word) of absence (the thing it “represents”). Surviving the negation of the meaning (the concept is, according to Hegel, strictly speaking Nothing), the word is what Bataille would call *la part maudite*: “less than nothing, worse than nothing.” The word – as the thing (sound, inscription), as the body of language – survives both the presence and the absence of thing (referent). But it does not survive by escaping the life of presence and the death of the negation,<sup>64</sup> as giving them a lie, but as a work, a triumph of both.<sup>65</sup> The word places the thing at a distance, but this accom-

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<sup>64</sup> The terms can be shifted around equally well depending on the valorisation of the polarised terms: the life of negation and the death of presence.

<sup>65</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Living On/Border Lines,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom & al. (New York: Continuum, 1985), p. 122; on pp. 102–103 Derrida writes: “A text lives only if it lives *on* [*sur-vit*], and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslat-

plishment is no mere displacement that would remove the object without making it different. The thing which survives itself, the thing that is comprehended, the thing that survives the negation of meaning becomes “not the same thing at a distance but the thing as distance.”<sup>66</sup> The word is neither the thing nor its meaning, it is something in which both the thing and the meaning appear as disappeared, where they appear as the very distance that is yet never covered fully. But this distance is precisely what makes the process of reference possible – the word is where “signification in general”<sup>67</sup> is presented to us in its strict meaninglessness, where the word means only itself: the word without meaning. Such impersonal bestowal of non-meaning takes us beyond the region of truth and into the realm of the Neuter where there is No one, and therefore no one is there to exercise power, to be able to change the world. The negation produced by writing is “worse than nothing” (worse than negation), it is not “efficient” enough to operate in the world of action with its principle of noncontradiction where “yes” and “no” must remain split.

Sprich auch du,  
sprich als letzter,  
sag deinen Spruch.

Sprich –  
Doch scheide das Nein nicht vom Ja.  
Gib deinem Spruch auch den Sinn:  
gib ihm den Schatten.

Gib ihm Schatten genug,  
gib ihm so viel,  
also du um dich verteilt weißt zwischen  
Mittnacht und Mittag und Mittnacht.

Blicke umher:  
sieh, wie's lebendig wird rings –  
Beim Tode! Lebendig!  
Wahr spricht, wer Schatten spricht.

(G I, 135)

{Speak, you also,  
speak as the last,  
have your say.

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able [...]. Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language [*langue*]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. Thus triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already living on, its life after life, its life after death.”

<sup>66</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “The Two Versions of the Imaginary,” in *The Space of Literature*, pp. 255–256.

<sup>67</sup> Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” p. 329.

Speak –  
 But keep yes and no unsplit.  
 And give your say this meaning:  
 give it the shade.

Give it shade enough,  
 give it as much  
 as you know has been dealt out between  
 midnight and midday and midnight.

Look around:  
 look how it all leaps alive –  
 where death is! [also “by death!”] Alive!  
 He speaks truly who speaks the shade.

(P 99)}

As we have already noted, the region of the word (poetry) is the region of the shade, the place where light is transformed into darkness, where clear definitions no longer apply. This region is the one where the word is not yet “yes” or “no,” where it is still the empty word without meaning. Such a word is necessarily obscure (incomprehensible, therefore dead in the conventional sense) but this obscurity, and only it, is what makes the world live again. In Celan’s words:

This obscurity, if it is not congenital, has been bestowed on poetry by strangeness and distance (perhaps of its own making) and for the sake of the encounter. (M 46)

The encounter (as already analysed) is possible only in the word that has not yet split “yes” from “no,” the word which stretches between these two possibilities (which makes the communication between these two terms possible and at the same time separates them in order that they do not become one) as well as between the essential night (the word as signification in general) and the light of day (the word as meaning) but always returning to its source, its nightly ground. In this sense, the shade is the “truth” of language – the region of the obscure makes the region of truth possible. It is its truth beyond truth, better (or worse) than truth.

The dark word, the word of poetry, is the word that transcends the terms of referentiality and the world. Its image is the passive word uttered by Lucile at the moment when there is no Lucile, when there is rather No one in the dispossession of suffering. But, as we remember, Celan also finds another figure for the event of poetry – it is Lenz’s “terrifying silence” which “takes his – and our – breath and words away.” (M 47) Yet this silence is still poetry and not only that – it is something which, seemingly, enables poetry, makes it possible.

Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way – the way of art – for the sake of just such a turn? And since the strange, the abyss *and* Medusa's head, the abyss *and* the automaton, all seem to lie in the same direction – it is perhaps this turn, this *Atemwende*, which can sort out the strange from the strange? It is perhaps here, in this one brief moment, that Medusa's head shrivels and the automatons run down? Perhaps, along with the I, estranged and freed *here*, *in this manner*, some other thing is also set free?

Perhaps after this, the poem can be itself ... can in this art-less, art-free manner go other ways, including the ways of art, time and again?

Perhaps. (M 47)

Thus, the poetic word is the word that is both word and silence, “the word in the image of silence” (*das Wort nach dem Bilde der Schweigens*), *das erschwiegene Wort* (G I, 138), the word that is neither sound nor silence but the other of both. Such a word is never spoken by Lenz, it befalls him “from the outside” as the inability he suffers passively: “... only, it sometimes bothered him that he could not walk on his head.”<sup>68</sup> The word comes from the region that is prior to enunciation, prior to the decision to speak because there is as yet no one to take such a decision. But the region is not empty – there is No one there; No one that is the entity which is not yet “I”; which is estranged from “I” because free from it; which goes beyond the constituted subject (who would be able to take the decision to speak the word) and the word (as something that would be performed as beginning-duration-end). No one, being the figure of the excess which both the subjectivity and the word are, prevents both silence and the communicable (meaningful) word from accomplishing themselves in this region. As excessive, the word is always more than itself, it always reaches forth beyond itself; it is always both inside and outside, infecting the silent emptiness which, therefore, cannot be silent. The essential word is what is there before someone starts speaking and what keeps speaking after s/he is finished. Thus, this word is never still, it is the non-sensical droning, buzzing, rumbling that persists in the thick of flurrying metaphors.

EIN DRÖHNEN: es ist  
die Wahrheit selbst  
unter die Menschen  
getreten,  
mitten ins  
Metapherngestöber.  
(G II, 89)

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<sup>68</sup> „... nur war es ihm manchmal unangenehm, daß er nicht auf dem Kopf gehn konnte.” Georg Büchner, *Werke in einem Band*, ed. Henri Poschmann (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1980), p. 161.

{A RUMBLING: truth  
itself has appeared  
among mankind  
in the very thick of their  
flurrying metaphors.  
(P 269)}

That is why, in the previously quoted poem, the wor(l)d-boulder (“sun-remote,” that is, within the dark region more original than light) was humming. The droning word is inserted into subjectivity by the exterior, and taken away from subjectivity in the moment of enunciation.<sup>69</sup> Such humming or droning is truth because it is only upon this original buzzing plane that the word as representation is possible. But “these murmurs” are “as our beginning”<sup>70</sup> not only because they are found among people (*unter die Menschen*); the word is much more than just a means to an end, the word is also the dimension “under” people (*unter die Menschen*), the dimension in which subjectivity originates. The *Atemwende* is precisely the moment in which subjectivity (as the seemingly self-enclosed entity in the world) is created – it is the word which is the turn of breath, subjectivity’s first breath which although silent is yet audible. And this is the actual reason why subjectivity finds itself as silent before speaking – the droning is never heard by subjectivity because, as its originary principle, it is subjectivity itself.<sup>71</sup>

As we have already demonstrated, the poetic word, covering the distance between night and day, is meaningless. One of the consequences of this meaninglessness is its illegibility or unreadability. The word and its region are illegible precisely because the word does not mean anything and “reading means making accessible a meaning that can be transmitted as such, in its own unequivocal, translatable identity.”<sup>72</sup> But such illegibility does not bring reading to a halt – the opaque surface of the word, although it yields nothing to be read, sets reading in motion.<sup>73</sup>

UNLESBARKEIT dieser  
Welt. Alles doppelt.

<sup>69</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, p. 121.

<sup>70</sup> IN DEN GERÄUSCHEN, wie unser Anfang, / [...] / zieh ich sie wieder auf, die / Spieldose – du / weißt: die unsichtbare, / die unhörbare (G II, 129).

<sup>71</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, p. 294. We have already mentioned Plato on sight – Merleau-Ponty takes a similar route: “[W]hat consciousness does not see it does not see for reasons of principle; it is because it is consciousness that it does not see. *What* it does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest (as the retina is blind at the point where the fibers that will permit the vision spread out into it” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 248).

<sup>72</sup> Derrida, “Living On/Border Lines,” p. 116.

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, “Living On/Border Lines,” p. 116.

Die starken Uhren  
geben der Spaltstunde recht,  
heiser.

Du, in dein Tiefstes geklemmt,  
entsteigst dir  
für immer.

(G II, 338)

{ILLEGIBILITY  
of this world. All things twice over.

The strong clocks justify  
the splitting hour,  
hoarsely.

You, clamped  
into your deepest part,  
climb out of yourself  
for ever.

(P 321)}

Because the word is excessive, because it always survives itself, it is permanently “on the outside.” Thus, lacking the initial moment of coincidence with itself, it cannot be correlated to the exterior – the initial moment of its relation with the exterior can never be ascertained; it is ungraspable. The impossibility of initiality is the impossibility of being for the first time, so there is no such time in which the word would not already be a repetition. (We have previously said that the word is the incessant buzzing that continues even “underneath” silence.) In the essential region, therefore, all is doubled (*alles doppelt*), everything is already its own repetition. This is also a region of pre-subjectivity in the shape of No one – No one as what is there when I am not there yet, as what lies deeper than “I,” as what is there clamped into my deepest part. No one is what is simultaneously close and distant from subjectivity – it is so close that it ruins all notions of closeness and therefore, being at no distance, it is, at the same time, infinitely distant. Thus, we can say that No one is that distance, is actually the figure of that distance which it never fully covers. The distance is never covered completely because, always lacking the point of self-coincidence, No one never reaches the place where it becomes subjectivity itself. Therefore, No one is what always approaches subjectivity in the form of its own double, and if it could ever come into subjectivity’s presence (which it cannot do, being precisely what lacks presence), “what it would encounter would be its own absence: itself, but itself become the other, which it would not recognize.”<sup>74</sup> In the region of the word,

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<sup>74</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “Inspiration,” in *The Space of Literature*, p. 169; this is the way Blanchot interprets the approach of the other beast in Franz Kafka’s story “The Burrow.”

- 44 subjectivity climbs out of itself and never accomplishes the task – No one is what is never present, what can only exist as the approach, never as something that approaches.<sup>75</sup>

The dimension of poetry is the region where nothing ever happens, because there is no presence. But the time of that region is not the ideal stasis that the word “eternal” describes. The eternity analysed by us is the “bad” eternity of the time in which death, as the figure of the approach, is present. This is the empty time when

[...] gerätst du  
beiden, Zeit und Ewigkeit, in die  
falsche  
Kehle.

(G II, 185)

{[...] in both, in  
time's and eternity's gullets, you go  
down  
the wrong way.

(P 277)}

Here, nothing is for the first time, “yet it starts over, again, again, infinitely,”<sup>76</sup> always starts and never stops happening; therefore, nothing can ever be said to have happened. The strong clocks cannot measure such time, these clocks that count separated moments, that split hour from hour, that justify (*recht geben*) the split of time into past, present and future. But the splitting hour (*Spaltstunde*), the hour that splits time, may also be the hour which is itself divided by a split (*Spalt*). Such a split hour (*Spaltstunde*) would be the hour that is not identical with itself, the hour that overflows the hour, the hour in whose split the outside, what is not this hour but another hour, made itself at home. The split hour is the dead time hour, the hour that starts over and over again and never passes, the hour that is more original than the splitting one and in which the strong clocks find their justification when they admit that the split hour is right (*geben der Spaltstunde recht*).

If, in the essential land of night and shadow, there is no punctuality of time, necessarily the notions of space have to be transformed, too. In the already quoted poem, after stating *Wahr spricht, wer Schatten spricht*, Celan continues:

Nun aber schrumpft der Ort, wo du stehst:  
Wohin jetzt, Schattenblöster, wohin?

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<sup>75</sup> Thus, in “The Meridian” speech, Celan would say that having written a poem “I had ... encountered myself,” that poems are outlines “for projecting ourselves into the search of ourselves” and “[a] kind of homecoming” (never reaching their home, however).

<sup>76</sup> Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude,” p. 30.

Steige. Taste empor.  
 Dünner wirst du, unkenntlicher, feiner!  
 Feiner: ein Faden,  
 an dem er herabwill, der Stern:  
 um unten zu schwimmen, unten,  
 wo er sich schimmern sieht: in der Dünung  
 wandernder Worte.

(G I, 135)

{But now shrinks the place where you stand:  
 Where now, stripped by shade, will you go?  
 Upward. Grope your way up.  
 Thinner you grow, less knowable, finer.  
 Finer: a thread by which  
 it wants to be lowered, the star:  
 to float farther down, down below  
 where it sees itself gleam: in the swell  
 of wandering words.

(P 99)}

The essential region is the land where, as we have said, all worldly attributes, the attributes of the light, are taken away, where one is not stripped of the shadow but of everything but the shadow, where one is stripped by the shadow or even the shadow-naked one (*Schattenblößer*). It is the land in which, stripped of the clothed forms of negation and power, the naked form of every relation is presented (or rather re-presented) to us. But just as the moment of bad eternity was not coincident with itself because, by being its own excess, it could not be accomplished, every location in this region, because it is not coincident in time, is also non-coincident in space. Therefore, every location is already a communication with other locations – because being “here” is already being “there” (that is, “elsewhere”), every locus transcends the mutually dependent “here” and “there” and takes on the characteristics of “nowhere” (because it is inadequate to the punctual notion of place). But it is the “nowhere” in which the “no” (that is, negation) is not the limit that divides space into a three- or four-dimensional grid (the “inefficient” negation). Rilke seems to have the same kind of space in mind when, in the eighth *Duino Elegy*, he speaks about “pure space” (*reiner Raum*) as “Nowhere without No” (*Nirgends ohne Nicht*).<sup>77</sup> Thus, the place shrinks until there is nothing left of it. But it does not mean that movement is arrested. The fact that every place communicates with every other place in space does *not* mean that every place becomes every other place and what is left is only one static and infinite point. The *loci* of the essential space are simultaneously infinitely close and infinitely distant. As we have

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<sup>77</sup> Reiner Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), pp. 54–55.



- 46 already seen in some of the examples we have looked at, the extreme proximity that does not allow any distance ruins the notion of proximity and thus establishes itself as infinitely distant. For Celan, this distance is strictly inhabitable: since the points in our space are infinitely close yet separate (the stable place has shrunk to nothing), the situation we encounter is one of the impossibility of any point of rest – the movement cannot be even momentarily arrested.<sup>78</sup> In another poem, Celan presents this impossibility in the figure of the arrow:

Tausend ist  
noch nicht einmal Eins.

Jeden Pfeil, den du losschickst,  
begleitet das mitgeschossene Ziel  
(G II, 164)

{A thousand is  
not even yet one.

Every arrow you send out  
is accompanied by the target that was shot with it}<sup>79</sup>

The approach, no matter what route it travels, will never be able to cover the “whole” distance, to establish even the slightest interval of utter separation which would make the notion of proximity possible. In a sense, the distance is never there, it *is* the approach, and only in the approach is the idea of the absolutely intimate distance conceivable: the target is the arrow’s flight, and thus it can never be reached. This is the logistics of the word and death in the figure of the approaching No one.

in den Herzfaden die  
Gespräche der Würmer geknüpft –:

eine Sehne, von der  
deine Pfeilschrift schwirrt,  
Schütze.

(G II, 22)

{In the heartthread, the  
knit of worm-talk –:

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<sup>78</sup> “Twice, with Lucile’s ‘Long live the king’ and when the sky opened as an abyss under Lenz, there seemed to occur an *Atemwende*, a turning of breath. Perhaps also while I was trying to head for that inhabitable distance which, finally, was visible only in the figure of Lucile.” (M 52)

<sup>79</sup> The author’s translation.

a bowstring, from which  
your arrowscript whirrs,  
archer.<sup>80</sup>

Not to be able to find a resting place, the impossibility of dwelling, is the predicament of permanent exile. It is the predicament of the region we are trying to describe, which is the land of the word (wandering words) and No one which always approaches, groping its way (we have described this region as one of darkness and hands, not of light and eyes) from the depths of the essential night towards the light of day, growing thinner and finer as it goes along, becoming less and less substantial, actually disappearing on the way (No one never arrives, never becomes subjectivity). But it does not mean that there is no contact between No one and its destination (the star, the world). In errance, which is the impossibility of immobility, the one who errs must have what Blanchot calls “always more initial rapport”<sup>81</sup> with the destination, notwithstanding his inability to arrive. Although the destination can never be reached (because it cannot be a locality), No one and the word (as the figures of the same passive force) are this insubstantial thread that is the metaphor of the proximity which will never become arrival. The essential region is the “country” that “wanders off everywhere like language,” which one has to “throw away” in order to “have it again.” (P 219)<sup>82</sup> It is the land of errance as error. If there are no stable points between which one can “travel,” such concepts as a straight line or the shortest distance cease to exist and the route must become erratic. Because there is no right way in such a dimension, the movement towards the goal cannot avoid being erratic, or even erroneous. The approach is always a detour on which one keeps losing one’s way.<sup>83</sup> And the detour is precisely the figure Celan chooses for the poem. In “The Meridian,” he writes:

Is it on such paths that poems take us when we think of them? And are these paths only detours, detours from you to you? But they are, among how many others, the paths on which language becomes voice. They are encounters, paths from a voice to a listening You, natural paths, outlines for existence perhaps, for projecting ourselves into the search for ourselves ... (M 53)

This understanding of the word and subjectivity as detour can also be helpful in grasping the meaning of the ultimate figure for poetry in Celan, the figure of the meridian. In the final words of the speech, the poet states:

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<sup>80</sup> Paul Celan, *Breathturn*, trans. Pierre Joris (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1995), p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, p. 83.

<sup>82</sup> [W]ie heißt es, dein Land / hinterm Berg, hinterm Jahr?/[...] / es wandert überallhin, wie die Sprache, / wirf sie weg, wirf sie weg, / dann hast du sie wieder [...] (G I, 284).

<sup>83</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, p. 83.

I find the connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters.

I find something as immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial, in the shape of a circle which, via both poles, rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics [*Tropen*]: I find ... a *meridian*. (M 55)

A circle (or an ellipse) of the meridian is the perfect figure for the detour. First, it is not a straight line. Second, it infinitely repeats itself, and therefore never arrives at itself as the circle, but, at the same time, it is always “at home,” within the circle; it ceaselessly climbs out of itself for ever and its point of destination always eludes it. But the poem is not only the vertigo of space. Lenz encountered the abyss when “on the 20th of January” he walked through the mountains.<sup>84</sup> And Celan involves the date into the poem:

Perhaps we can say that every poem is marked by its own “20th of January”? Perhaps the newness of poems written today is that they try most plainly to be mindful of this kind of date? (M 47)

But what is this kind of date? How are we to understand the poetic date? Celan continues:

But do we not all write from and toward some such date? What else could we claim as our origin?

But the poem speaks. It is mindful of its dates, but it speaks. (M 47–48)

As we have already seen, the nature of the date is that it always returns. The date that would not return would be the absolute crypt, the proper static eternal point excluded from both “splitting hour” (past, present, future) and “split hour” (empty time, “bad” eternity). This would make the date completely mute.<sup>85</sup> Even within the realm of the day, the date always returns as the same (commemoration of one day) and yet other (another day). The date, as well as the word and subjectivity, is always more than itself, is always ahead of itself and having the same structure as the other two it can be said to be their originary experience. But, by the same token, it is also its own origin: what makes it the date is its excessiveness, its being more than the date; therefore, *being* its own origin, the date (and the word and subjectivity) cannot *reach* its origin because the second event presupposes the meeting of two absolutely separate entities. This would mean that the meridian, being the figure of the poetic word, is also the figure of the date, the date that constantly repeats itself, too. Thus, the meridian would be the figure not only of the *détour* but also of the *retour* – the meridian as the notion of the date *spatialised*. This lack of distinction must imply that what we are presented with in the figure

<sup>84</sup> The first sentence of *Lenz* reads: *Den 20. Jänner ging Lenz durchs Gebirg* (Büchner, p. 161).

<sup>85</sup> A very detailed meditation on the nature of the date in Celan’s poetry can be found in Jacques Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,” in *Word Traces*.

of the meridian is the very principle of movement as approach in the poetic region of the second “strangeness”: in such a region, the time/space distinction is an impossibility, yet time and space do not become one another.<sup>86</sup>

Having put forward the notion of the poem as encounter with the Other, Celan says:

Ladies and gentlemen, what am I actually talking about when I speak from *this* position, in *this* direction, with *these* words about the poem, no, about *the* poem?

I am talking about a poem which does not exist!

The absolute poem – no, it certainly does not, cannot exist.

But in every real poem, even the least ambitious, there is this ineluctable question, this exorbitant claim. (M 51)

The region of poetry, as we have repeatedly said, is the region of the encounter. But the familiar notion of poetry, the notion of poetry as “taken for granted,” comes from perceiving poetry as either referential or self-referential. Both of these approaches are governed by the economy of what Lacoue-Labarthe calls “ontic comparison.”<sup>87</sup> What takes place in traditional poetic language – what is accepted *as* the poetic language, “art as we already know it” as Celan calls it – is that by comparison of the already present with the already present we willingly fashion figures, images, metaphors and other tropes. But such language, being stabilised in its grid of relations, is not the language that would be able to approach the region of the Other where the to-be-represented cannot be grasped in its movement. The Other is what ruins all notions within the realm of representation and reference: since the essential region grounds the possibility of representation (therefore of comparison), there is nothing to which one can compare it. Celan, to be sure, is aware of that; the above passage continues:

Then what are images?

What has been, what can be perceived, again and again, and only here and only now. Hence the poem is the place where all the tropes and metaphors want to be led *ad absurdum*.

And topological research?

Certainly. But in the light of what is still to be searched for: in a u-topian light. (M 51)

Poetry is a radical interruption of referentiality but it does not perform it by putting an end to figures and tropes. What is more, the performance is not

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<sup>86</sup> In “The Great Refusal” (p. 46), Blanchot calls it *espacement*. In the English version, it is somewhat misleadingly translated as “spacing.”

<sup>87</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, “Catastrophe,” p. 151.

50 accomplished by a poet: it is the figures themselves that “want to be led *ad absurdum*” but which never *are* absurd. The arrival at the absurdity never happens because by hollowing the images and tropes out, poetry presents the pure “perception” of the encounter (which is, simultaneously, not entirely pure because it nevertheless uses images, however hollow they are) as something that can be perceived “only here and only now” (as pure singularity) and, at the same time, only “again and again” (as pure repetition). After all, the meridian “rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics.”<sup>88</sup> In addition, the place for which the poem searches is the *ou-tópos*, non-place, the desert which is the image of infinite straying, where one is both in exile and at home.

Yet the poem always fails; it fails because it is “impossible” – according to Celan such absolute poem “cannot exist.” But, after everything we have said, this impossibility can be seen in a different light. The poem cannot exist because it belongs to a different set of terms than the notion of being present; admitting neither beginning nor end, the poem, always redoubling itself, escapes the terms of “ordinary” possibility. The poem’s errance, the quality of ever repeating itself and therefore never coming to an end, never accomplishing itself, is the poem’s error – error as failure of being present to itself and others in the world of negation where it could be grasped as the object of action. Thus, the failure of the poem does not have the ordinary meaning of meeting with no success (although this too). Always going beyond all opposition, as well as dialectical contradiction, and despite the negative form it takes on in grammar (it has to be explained as *neither* this *nor* that<sup>89</sup>), it always transcends all forms of negativity. What is more, erring in the region of “nowhere without no,” the land in which the “no” is not a limit (it is something like the affirmative “no”; a pure oxymoron – another “neither/nor”), one cannot define oneself except by taking this passive, powerless “no” and turning it into the active negative.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the passive “no” is, so to speak, doubly removed from the world of action, the world whose working principle is negation. This double remove allows us to claim that the failure of the word not only has nothing to do with denial or negation but that it is actually *doubly affirmative* in its essence. The core of the word is failure, because the word is impossible, yet this failure does not deny what *is*; it is its affirmation. Therefore,

Art (this includes Medusa’s head, the mechanism, the automaton), art,  
the uncanny strangeness which is so hard to differentiate and perhaps is only  
*one* after all – art lives on. (M 52)

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<sup>88</sup> *Tropen* – in German both “tropics” and “tropes.”

<sup>89</sup> Derrida, “Living On / Border Lines,” p. 107.

<sup>90</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “Literature and the Original Experience,” in *The Space of Literature*, p. 243.

Art is both its own death and life. It is the triumph of death in negation as the “first” uncanny strangeness, that is, “art as we already know it,” the art of iambic words and representation. But it is also the triumph of life as the “second” uncanny strangeness, the strangeness of the abyss and the perpetual approach. It is not surprising that these two strangenesses are so difficult to differentiate, because they *are* one after all – the word is always the errant word but, nevertheless, it appears in the world; it is always more than itself, yet it can be read *here* on *this* page.

We cannot be certain whether poetry, the object we have chosen for our examination, is still alive. Celan himself is never quite sure, qualifying his statements with “perhaps” at every turn. We may have doubts whether it lives or not, yet ultimately it is our uncertainty that is of importance here: we cannot be sure – thus poetry lives *on*.



## Beckett: Against the Figure of Reason

We cannot be sure – thus literature lives on. The word is errant, perpetually on the way from nowhere to nowhere. The place of origin, the sender, the destination are indefinite. Even the message, the information, is uncertain. Yet it “surfaces” at a particular moment and at a particular place. How can we understand this? What is the meaning of such occurrence? And does it have any meaning at all? These are questions that can be said to have been raised by Samuel Beckett (or is it only our imputation?) in most of his prose work (that is to say, in what is by “general opinion” qualified as prose<sup>1</sup>) and he is the author we are going to turn to in trying to elucidate them. But, since an examination of the whole corpus would require a much more extended piece of writing, and might lead us towards many matters which are not directly relevant for our specific study, I propose to concentrate our attention on what can be termed Beckett’s “second trilogy,” that is, the three longer works published by him in the 1980s: *Company*,<sup>2</sup> *Ill Seen Ill Said*<sup>3</sup> and *Worstward Ho*.<sup>4</sup> These texts have been selected because they possess at least three advantages for our purposes. First, they are unexpectedly verbose as for “late” Beckett – their collected edition is 128 pages long, while the average 1970s work consists of not more than a few – so the matters they concern (and which are also our subject of interest) are treated quite extensively. Second, this trilogy is an excellent anthology of Beckettian motifs of the post-*How It Is*<sup>5</sup> period, and therefore its examination might have the advantage of being somewhat exemplary. And three, as was also the case with the “first trilogy”

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<sup>1</sup> Can a text that starts: “From where she lies she sees Venus rise,” be considered prose? Some of the problems involved in such a qualification, taking as an example Beckett’s *Ill Seen Ill Said*, are examined in Marjorie Perloff, “Between Verse and Prose: Beckett and the New Poetry” in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1986), pp. 191–206.

<sup>2</sup> First published in English as *Company* (London: John Calder, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> First published in French as *Mal vu Mal dit* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1981) and then in the author’s translation as *Ill Seen Ill Said* (London: John Calder, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> First published in English as *Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> First published in French as *Comment c’est* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1961) and then in the author’s translation as *How It Is* (London: John Calder, 1964).



54 (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*),<sup>6</sup> all three works are devoted to roughly the same field of pursuit and try to approach the encountered problems from many angles and with different “tools,” which might introduce some edifying variability into our study. Naturally (for Beckett), all these exertions end in failure, but there has been surprisingly little contention among the critics as to the significance of this crucial term. An attitude that is especially common is one that refuses to take the failure that is clearly implicated in Beckett’s works seriously and at face value: yes, many critics and readers seem to be saying, Beckett fails but there is a meaning to this failure. Beckett’s works make sense even if they show the lack of sense (e.g. in the universe); they show us that the truth we have to know in order to live our lives in a profoundly human way is that the world is void of meaning or metaphysical purpose. If we act on such knowledge we might not be able to turn our lives into a smashing existential success (the discrepancy between existence and essence is going to make sure of that), but we will be able to avoid failing in our lives as human beings, that is, we will be conscious that it is precisely this discrepancy that makes us human. Are such claims – ones that present Beckett’s work, almost in spite of itself, as originating a meaning<sup>7</sup> – justifiable? And is there really any other course to be taken by a literary work? Is it possible for literature to produce any outcome other than meaning? These are questions we will try to pursue further.

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Beckett’s writing is not of a kind that builds up toward some dramatic climax – the first paragraph of *Company* says it all: “A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.” (5)<sup>8</sup> There is, however, a dose of formal dexterity in these two simple sentences, because what they describe seems to be anterior to the very act of description: the scene of writing itself. They also present us with some problems concerning the identities involved in the text. Apparently, there is the voice, therefore the speaker; also “one on his back in the dark,” that is to say, the hearer. These are the patent presences but, since they are obviously narrated, there is the third identity, the narrator, whose narration is directed towards yet another presence, some addressee – hence the injunction: “Imagine.” These nine words already seem to bring to life quite a company. The next paragraph develops the scene:

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<sup>6</sup> In French: *Molloy* (Editions de Minuit, 1951); in English: *Molloy*, trans. Patrick Bowles in collaboration with S. Beckett (Paris: Olympia Press, 1955). In French: *Malone meurt* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1951); in English: *Malone Dies*, trans. S. Beckett (London: John Calder, 1958). In French: *L’Innommable* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1953); in English: *The Unnamable*, trans. S. Beckett, in *Molloy Malone Dies The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> These are, we have to note, the claims which ultimately question Beckett’s integrity – if the conveyor belt of meaning is in order, all the talk about failure becomes just posturing.

<sup>8</sup> My quotations come from the collected edition: Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1989).

That then is the proposition. To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past. With occasional allusions to a present and more rarely to a future as for example, You will end as you now are. And in another dark or in the same another devising it all for company. (5–6)

The last sentence introduces some confusion into the quartet we seemed to have detected as well as into the original scene. Above all, there is yet another identity here – the deviser, “another devising it all for company” – but who is he? The author? The narrator? Or yet another presence whose imagination brings everything to life? What is more, the stage gets multiplied: apart from the original scene in the dark, there might be yet another dark, which would be the place where the deviser abides. As we can see, matters get more and more complicated, so in order not to widen the domain of confusion, it would be advisable to stick to the rudimentary question: who is talking to whom and about whom? Bearing this in mind, we can delve into the narrative in order to find more clues. But what we find is not very promising – neither the sender nor the addressee can be definitely ascertained:

If the voice is not speaking to him [the hearer] it must be speaking to another. So with what reason remains he reasons. To another of that other. Or of him. Or of another still. To another of that other or of him or of another still. To one on his back in the dark in any case. Of one on his back in the dark whether the same or another. (8–9)

And, further on, we find similar uncertainty about the speaker:

For why or? Why in another dark or in the same? And whose voice asking this? Who asks, Whose voice asking this? And answers, His soever who devises it all. In the same dark as his creature or in another. For company. Who asks in the end, Who asks? And in the end answers as above? And adds long after to himself, Unless another still. (19)

Although there seems to be nothing strange in the multiplicatory power of imagination – the imaginary objects can be multiplied *ad infinitum* – this process has traditionally been conceived as working only one way: the imagined can divide itself without end, but the source of the imaginings, the subject, in order to multiply itself in the imaginary act, has to remain one and stable. In spite of that, this excerpt opens the production from the “subjective” end, too. If it is possible to ask, “Who asks, Whose voice asking this?” and then, “Who asks in the end, Who asks?” then nothing can stop the narrator from pursuing in this vein: “Who asks, Who asks, Who asks?” and so on.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 68.

56 What happens then is that the site of imagination or discourse gets emptied by such an operation and the deviser recedes into infinity.

But all the self-reflexive gestures in the text, the gestures that try to locate the source and the destination of the voice take place outside the voice proper. Addressing the unspecified “you,” the voice itself speaks of “a past” and large parts of the narration are devoted to “tableaux” evoked by remembrance – memories of a birth, childhood, adolescence, and maturity that are interspersed with the self-reflexive parts of *Company*. Such a situation, however, brings new questions to the surface: whose past is that and for what reason does the voice relate it? The second of these seems to be the easier one to answer, because some pages into the “story” we find the following characteristic of the voice:

Another trait its repetitiousness. Repeatedly with only minor variants the same bygone. As if willing him by this dint to make it his. To confess, Yes I remember. Perhaps even to have a voice. To murmur, Yes I remember. What an addition to company that would be! A voice in the first person singular. Murmuring now and then, Yes I remember. (12–13)

The voice is, apparently, trying to force the hearer into acknowledging that the recounted memories are his (the hearer’s). It all comes down to the meaning of the pronoun “I,” or rather, since “I” is a shifter,<sup>10</sup> to the matter of its distribution, to the identity or identities the pronoun relates to. This knowledge would, moreover, pave the way for our putting into focus the deviser of what the narrative, in a few places, calls a “fable” (51 and *passim*). The already quoted passage continues:

Who asks in the end, Who asks? And in the end answers as above? And adds long after to himself, Unless another still. Nowhere to be found. Nowhere to be sought. The unthinkable last of all. Unnamable. Last person. I. (19)

The one who “devises it all,” the one who always comes last – because it is the vanishing point of the infinitely receding succession of devisers – is the

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<sup>10</sup> Roman Jakobson’s term, whose work on pronouns was expanded in the late 1950s by Émile Benveniste. According to him, personal pronouns differ in a very substantial way from words designating objects such as a tree, because “tree” always refers to the same signified, the same concept no matter who utters the word. This is not the case with “I” or “you”; the pronoun “I” refers at the same time to any individual whatsoever and the particular individual who utters it. Shifters become identified only *temporarily in the act of discourse*: “I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. [...] It is in the instance of discourse in which *I* designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the ‘subject’. And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is really no other objective testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself thus gives about himself.” (Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. M.E. Meek (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 226.)

consolidated figure of the I-subject. Such placing of the originator of the “fable” may also allow us to understand better the positions of other “identities” within the narrative. At the very beginning of the text the “actors” are located with respect to each other:

Use of the second person marks the voice [of the speaker]. That of the third that cankerous other [of the narrator]. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks [the hearer] there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not. (6)

The situation would seem to be easy to grasp if it were not for one “presence.” We would be able to represent the scene as one in which the originally split deviser of the voice and of the voice’s hearer tries also to devise himself as a whole, a self-present entity. This deviser in order to devise himself as present would have to devise the voice and the hearer as the two that could identify each other as one and the same. Such identification would enable the reverse movement to start, that is, the production of the deviser as one. But this neat structure is ruined by the existence of yet another “actor” on the memory scene – the presence of the narrative voice breaks the feeble equilibrium of the self-identifying subject. And this is precisely its function: in Beckett’s text, such an identification is impossible and this very impossibility, which is not a stable concept but just a (lack of) movement of identification, in order to be presented at all, is represented in the *figure* of the narrating voice which is *the very movement of representation* back to the deviser but which is stalled since it cannot speak to and of the hearer as the “you”-voice can. But the reason why communication between the narrator and the hearer is impossible remains to be discovered.

Apart from being essentially staged, the voice that speaks to one in the dark has various other characteristics: it is flat, it is faint, it unexpectedly changes places, etc.; but, apart from everything else, it also seems to possess a quality that places the whole manifestly aural scene in question:

From ranging far and wide as if in quest the voice comes to rest and constant faintness. To rest where? Imagine warily.

Above the upturned face. Falling tangent to the crown. So that *in the faint light it sheds* were there a mouth to be seen he would not see it. Roll as he might his eyes. (38; italics mine)

The voice sheds a light that the hearer is able to see – the hearer *sees* (or, at least, might see) the voice as it speaks in the dark. What we can observe here seems strangely familiar and the familiarity is of a very old date. Actually, this kind of scene may take us back almost as far as it is possible to travel –

58 to one of the founding scenes of the western civilisation, a veritable origin of sorts.

In Plato's metaphysics the sensible world, being mutable, cannot be considered real and, therefore, much cannot be gained, in terms of knowledge, by the direct practice of the senses. There is, however, one agency that is able to provide us with knowledge that is certain and which does not originate from the sensual reality. This infallible source of wisdom is everyone's soul which is without a beginning and immortal. A quality of being eternal is precisely the source of the soul's claims to knowledge because everything that really exists, by very definition, has to be changeless and eternal and cannot be perceived by our senses. In our perception we only get the semblance of the real reflected in the imperfect world of mutable matter. Reality, or what actually exists, is the world of Ideas of which the highest is the Idea of Good. The Ideas are colourless and shapeless, imperceptible to the eye of flesh, but *visible* to the soul by means of the mind.<sup>11</sup> The soul that collapses into the mortal body forgets what it has seen, but this knowledge never gets erased completely. There is always a certain inner voice present at our disposal which is the voice of the soul's memory, and it is this voice that is able to take us back to the scene on which the Ideas are presented. The *voice*, if we listen to it in an appropriate manner (and such listening is called *anamnesis* by Socrates<sup>12</sup>) can take us back to what our soul has already *seen* – the Ideas which present themselves as *eidos* (from *eido*: to see). It is sight, therefore, that is the domain of absolute knowledge and the intricate staging of hearing is posited only to be converted, through the synesthetic detour, into the scene of a seeing: the scene of listening and the scene of seeing are simply *identical* – “There is of course the eye,” says the narrator of *Company*, “[f]illing the whole field.” (16)

In *Company*, darkness as well as voice belong to the same order, the order of the seen. This darkness is clearly visible and gradable:

The temptation is strong to decree that there is nothing to see. But too late for the moment. For he sees a change of dark when he opens or shuts his eyes. (41)

Is, then, the scopic inevitable? And if so, what is the reason? The answers to these questions seem to lie in the very staging of the scene of knowledge: the scene of listening cannot by-pass the scene of seeing for the simple reason that the most important element of the former – the voice – is already a *figure* and as figure it is accessible only in a seeing.

The voice, by re-presenting the idea in the sensible, that is to say, by being the figure of the idea, leads one to the presentation proper of the

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<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* (247 C) in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 494.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Meno* (81 D) in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, p. 364.

idea as imageless, immutable and present. This presence is presented in an (in)sight that permits access without help of the senses; that is to say, the insight is enabled in all its ideality by what we can call, after Kant, the “forming force” of reason or transcendental imagination,<sup>13</sup> which are categories “empty” of any content, categories as that which allow us to perceive an entity as a separate entity and not as just an aggregate of its sensible qualities. Yet such a presentation called “presence” is already a *figure produced by reason* because these categories, that is, what allows reason to perceive something as present, the means by which reason installs its object as present to reason, are necessarily the product of reason. In such a way, reason installs *itself* and becomes its own producer: there is a double mirror within reason in which reason reflects itself as reflection. Ultimately, and paradoxically, it is the mirror that produces everything including the mirror itself. Therefore, what is intelligible and present because it is seen as *eidos* is already a figure, that is to say, *fiction* – and, accordingly, the scene of listening/seeing, in both *Phaedrus* and *Company*, is the one that has been or has to be “imagine[d] warily.” (38)

As we have already noted, the region of seeing is also the domain of knowledge: what is seen is the (re)presentation of the essence, which is pure knowledge itself. In this sense, representation belongs not only to the field of the optical but to the theorised as well; or, rather, the optical is at the same time always already the domain where theorising is taking place – *any figure has its source in the figure of reason*. The point of this proposition can be clearly grasped in the double meaning of the above genitive: reason produces figures (e.g. categories) but, in producing the figures, it, by producing them, also produces itself; in such a two-way process reason, to be itself, cannot only be reasoning; it also has to reason (or produce) itself as reasoning. And this concept of reason as theorising in figures, that is to say, bestowing meaning, or as the presence present to itself in its presence is obviously also the figure of the Cartesian human subject who thinks and knows himself thinking. Therefore, taking this homology into consideration, we can be justified to say that *every figure as such is ultimately the figure of humanity* – and in this sense, but only in this sense, man is the only figure that is the source of meaning. Such a situation, at least, results in a history of philosophy that valorises the pre-expressive, pre-representational presence, that is to say, the whole history of western thinking from Plato to Husserl, and perhaps beyond.

Yet this original scene of philosophy may also be regarded in a different and more sinister light. If we read further into *Phaedrus* we find out that it is also

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<sup>13</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 70. The present chapter is greatly indebted to the work done on mimesis by Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. Although the relevant material will appear in the notes, I must stress my debt to their work in general – the aspects of influence are too numerous to be specified every time.

60 the scene where the *dead* come to speak – the voice or voices that one hears in the dark are also the voices of one’s previous incarnations. Therefore, it is the dead that lead one to the figure (as the idea) and who present themselves as figure (the immutable knowledge). We come here to the unexpected and portentous juncture – could it be that the figure of reason is the figure of dead humanity or the subject as dead?

As we have already mentioned, the scene of *Company* is the scene of an *agon*, a struggle in which the existent-subject devises the voice which tries to force the hearer (the non-reflexive “level” of the subject that cannot be turned into figure) to acknowledge the past which the voice relates as the past of the hearer. The voice, by presenting the past as figures, cannot help theorising (that is, fabricating) it. The hearer listens to/sees these figures but is not able to recognise them as representing himself. And the very process of non-recognition, of *being unable to see the theorising that is taking place*, is presented as the narratorial voice – the narrator is the obstacle on the way to the engendering of the subject by the subject itself. Because the narrator cannot speak to and of the hearer at the same time, because the speaking self and the self that is spoken<sup>14</sup> struggle to oust the opponent from its place, the subject is not permitted to freeze itself in narcissistic self-speculation – if it was not for the fight that is figured in the obstacle of the narrator, the subject would represent itself to itself and, by doing this, become fictional, stable, *dead*.

This is precisely what happens on the stage of autobiography and this is also why this kind of writing, in spite of all its claims, cannot avoid being fictional. The narrator suggests that:

You lie in the dark with closed eyes and see the scene. As you could not at the time. (30–31)

In order to evoke the scene as a scene of memory, that is, as stable and present one has to make oneself absent from it, one has to put oneself out. Therefore, remembering oneself is actually imagining oneself as an other who is present within the scene, also imagined as having taken place for this other. Remembering is, then, devising oneself as other and, necessarily, also as the other remembering this other. Here again, we come across the infinite regression.

Deviser of the voice and of its hearer and of himself. Deviser of himself for company. Leave it at that. He speaks of himself as of another. He says speaking of himself, He speaks of himself as of another. (20) [and: He speaks, He speaks, He speaks of himself as of another, etc.]

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Wesling and Tadeusz Sławek, *Literary Voice: The Calling of Jonah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 12–13.



But the other of memory is not only fictional but also, as the figure which is intelligible, that is, immutable and whole, he is not a living other. The subject that is present to itself, the subject that knows and means, is nothing other than the voice from beyond the grave. In this sense, autobiography, as the narrative in the first person, is strictly speaking impossible to write, and what passes for it takes in all its actuality the form of an *agony*<sup>15</sup> – a tortuous and hopeless struggle between the author and the dead to the death of the former, when (after the body is buried) he remains in the world only as a figment, an image: stabilised, theorised, himself dead.<sup>16</sup>

But how is the self other than figure, other than death itself, possible? Or, rather – since this is precisely what Beckett shows – how is the self as figure impossible? And what is the meaning of such an impossibility? In order to elucidate these matters, we have to go back again to the problem of “presence.”

As we have already noted, presence is a double “phenomenon” – it is *at once* the presence of the object of consciousness to consciousness (reason, self, mind’s eye – whatever we call it), and the presence of consciousness to itself. The present object of consciousness is necessarily ideal, since, in order to appear in consciousness (in order to present itself), it has to be rid of all empirical diversity – it has to be identical with itself as the same. And it is precisely the very ideality of such an object that makes possible its being infinitely repeated as re-presented as the image of the immutable same. If this is the case, then we can say that the sensible re-presentation is the return of the pre-expressive presentation of the ideal object of consciousness. But there is a logical flaw in this understanding of representation (although such an understanding is the history of metaphysics) – the very possibility of the return of presentation as re-presentation is what makes presentation as such impossible: re-presentation would not be possible, if presentation did not already allow its own absence. That is to say, the repetition of the same of presentation would

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<sup>15</sup> Wesling and Sławek, *Literary Voice*, p. 179.

<sup>16</sup> After having written the first version of this essay my attention was drawn to the previously cited book by Wesling and Sławek which very often moves along similar routes. Especially interesting in the light of my analysis of autobiographical subject is the fact that they discuss the Celanian subject as “belittled by memories which do not perform an act of determining one’s location” and that brings up “a place which immediately begins to shrink, thus changing into an opening, a chasm.” (57) This would, apart from all else, seem to confirm our consistency in discussing both writers. Wesling and Sławek also discuss the production of the subject (not only autobiographical) as an *agon*: “The speaking subject is an in-process, dialogic relationship between whoever speaks and whoever is spoken, theorized in full consciousness that there will be baffles, multiplications of imaginary selves and voices, diacritical distances, slippages of meaning, problems with pronouns. These troubles arise because each of the fraternal internal antagonists, the speaking and the spoken, wishes to interfere with, silence, and finally kill off the other, even as both must know that the continuous mutual interference is what creates the effect of literature.” (13) The quotation to which this fragment refers is the extract from Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*. As has been and will be seen, all these matters are also relevant to this study, although the focus is different.



62 be out of the question, if this same were not originally other than itself.<sup>17</sup> This brings us to the conclusion that it is not the same that is the matrix for repetition or re-presentation, but that it is precisely repetition or the split origin of the same that produces the same – that, originally, the same is always other to itself. What is more, this primal differing from itself is obviously also the point where the originary deferring<sup>18</sup> takes place, as the identity of the object is always deferred in the chain of representations the object is. (The object is always already a representation, a repetition which can lead only to another repetition.) Therefore, the originary repetition is also the site where time and space originate, but *not as presence* – if time meant just presence, if the source of time were not already split, if time did not originally defer itself, if it were identical with itself, time would already be still-born at its very source, or, in other words, there would be neither time nor space since there could not be any difference between the points of time or space.

Thus, as we have said, the origin of consciousness is split, is always already repeated. In terms of our discussion, this means that, since it is always at once present and absent, it can never be stabilised enough to be seen (as either present or absent) and, therefore, it can never be made into a figure. Moreover, for the very reason that the split is anterior to consciousness, or, rather, that it is what produces consciousness, it is irrecoverable for consciousness – the subject cannot see (theorise, figure) its own conception. And here we have come to the point that might provide us with an explanation for why the process of self-constitution by the subject in *Company* is impossible: the subject cannot be present to itself because it cannot theorise its own conception and engender itself in seeing itself do so.<sup>19</sup> All attempts at self-production as presence have to fail because the subject cannot act as its own author/father, and all attempts to become one have to end in bringing up the figure of an author-deviser who, as a figure, has to be devised by yet another deviser who also becomes a figure and so on *ad infinitum*. Beckett's innovation here is not that he splits the consciousness into separate "identities" (this has been done often enough), but that he uses figures in ways that go entirely against the grain of tradition – the figures are there to provide company (they are the figures of humanity, after all, but, as the figures of humanity, they are also the figures of the same and, therefore, not very companionable), but the function of at least some of them is not to elucidate, to provide knowledge, but *to confuse and obstruct* – "Confusion too is company up to a point," says the narratorial voice. (20) This makes of the narrative voice especially a particularly ambiguous junction – on the one hand, his figure is there to sabotage any possibility of neat categorisations within the narrative, but, on

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Trezise, *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 19–20.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982).

<sup>19</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 127.

the other, the narrator is, at the same time, also the very figure of such confusion and obstruction. It makes for a very strange literary feat indeed – the veritable figure of the stranger. But this stranger is not just an other – since it is not the figure of knowledge, it is not the figure of the same and, therefore, also not the figure of humanity and its reason. What we have come to touch upon in this place seems to be lying outside the domain of man and within the realm of the monstrous. It seems that, in the stranger, we have encountered the figure of the properly *inhuman*, and – since, in spite of all, it actually is a figure – also that which we could, hesitatingly, call a sense of the inhuman, or the inhuman as sense.<sup>20</sup> But we would have to wait for the closer explanation of a sense of that sense.

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There is no more listening in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The divergent voices are gone, as are the problems of authoring or remembering oneself. But the eye – no longer dissimulated by voice – remains: “this filthy eye of flesh” (74) as well as “the other” one (64). It sees a certain “she” in a certain landscape:

The cabin. [...] At the inexistent centre of a formless place. Rather more circular than otherwise finally. Flat to be sure. To cross it in a straight line takes her from five to ten minutes. [...] Stones increasingly abound. Ever scatter even the rankest weed. Meagre pastures hem it round on which it slowly gains. (58)

The two zones [stone and pasture] form a roughly circular whole. As though outlined by a trembling hand. Diameter. Careful. Say one furlong. On an average. Beyond the unknown. (59)

There is also a (grave?) stone to which she is at times drawn, sometimes there are ewes in the pasture, and constantly twelve figures, in the familiar Beckettian long overcoats and block hats, that watch her from afar, always from the same distance. These images keep fading yet they always come back again.

The figure of a woman seems to be no more than an apparition – she comes and goes as she pleases:

With her right hand she holds the edge of the bowl. With her left the spoon dipped in the slop. So far so good. But before she can proceed she fades and disappears. Nothing now for the staring eye but the chair in its solitude. (78–79)

Although less “material” than objects (which are, nevertheless, imaginary ones), she is not within the controlling powers of the eye, and therefore

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<sup>20</sup> We use the word “sense” here in an appropriately monstrous way, that is to say, stretching its signification between English and French, as meaning at least all of these: the sensible, the intelligible and the *direction*.

64 seems to be more than just a figment of the imagination. If she appears balancing on the invisible line dividing presence from absence, then the question arises: which eye sees her – the eye of flesh or the other? But there is no knowing:

Already all confusion. Things and imaginings. As of always. Confusion amounting to nothing. Despite precautions. If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else. Where no more precautions to be taken. No precautions possible. Cooped up there with the rest. Hovel and stones. The lot. And the eye. How simple all then. If only all could be pure figment. Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be. (67)

The reason why there is no knowing if she is inside or outside the skull lies in the fact that the eye, in its essence, is one, although doubled – the eye of flesh and the eye of mind are one and the same since no matter whether they use the sensible or the intelligible as their “raw materials,” they always make them into supposedly immutable figures (“Neither be nor been nor by any shift to be”) because they are the only “means” by which the eye can grasp anything. In this way, it is the eye that produces, fictions or, as the narrator would say, “poisons” both the real and the imagined – that is why the ideas of the outside and the inside seem to cease to mean much anymore:

Such the confusion now between real and – how say its contrary? No matter. That old tandem. Such now the confusion between them once so twain. And such the farrago from eye to mind. For it to make what sad sense it may. No matter now. Such equal liars both. Real and – how ill say its contrary? The counter-poison. (82)

This confusion between the real and fiction may be said to add to the hypothesis of the female figure as an apparition, since such a confusion is one of the crucial points Freud clearly emphasises when he tries to analyse the sources of the uncanny:

There is one more point of general application which I should like to add, though, strictly speaking, it has been included in what has already been said about animism and modes of working of the mental apparatus that have been surmounted; for I think it deserves special emphasis. This is that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between the imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises, and so on.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 367.

We can add that one of the other things Freud mentions as sources of the uncanny is repetition in diverse forms: as the recurrence of the same thing, as the returning of repressed affects or as the compulsion to repeat.<sup>22</sup> Without delving too much into psychoanalysis, we can only note in passing that repetition is one of the basic structural motifs of *Ill Seen Ill Said* (and the whole trilogy). However, what interests us more here is the relationship between the uncanny scene as it is seen and the scopic as such.

Since, as demonstrated by Freud, a given situation is perceived as uncanny when the confusion between the real and the imaginary arises, the scene of the uncanny must be a region in which the eye loses hold of what it actually sees or does not see. Such a position is not the position of knowledge: what is perceived is uncertain and questionable; the uncanny destabilises, defamiliarises perception of the phenomenal and especially the scopic. We can say, therefore, that what is missing in the uncanny is precisely what Plato would call an idea, that is to say, the “forms,” that which brings the phenomenal under the aegis of knowledge, that which schematises and therefore establishes the real.

But, obviously, it is not the missing idea that is re-presented as the old woman, nor is she the missing *of* the idea. The appearance of the apparition accomplishes a much more subtle sleight of hand. Because she is co-existent with the confusion between the fictive and the non-fictive, it is impossible to establish whether she *originates from* the confusion or is the *originator of* it. As we have already established, every figure is a repetition, but the figure-as-repetition is itself the product of the repetition which is not itself a figure, but which originates figuration. Having no perceptible or intelligible source, the figure of the woman allows the missing (originary) repetition, on the basis of which the repetition of the figure of the woman is possible, to “appear” – but in its missing: the woman is neither present nor absent. As, in another context, Lacoue-Labarthe says:

The absence of that on the basis of which there is imitation, the absence of the imitated or the repeated [...] [in our case it is the absence of the idea, the absence of the consolidated object of sight] reveals what is by definition unrevealable – imitation or repetition. In general, nothing could appear, arise or be revealed, “occur,” were it not for repetition. The absence of repetition, by consequence, reveals only the unrevealable, gives rise only to the improbable, and throws off the perceived and well-known.<sup>23</sup>

This is precisely why the confusion of imaginings and things about which Beckett speaks is “[c]onfusion amounting to nothing” – what comes to the surface here is the very movement of figuration or *the mimetic itself*; there-

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<sup>22</sup> Freud, “The Uncanny,” pp. 258–261.

<sup>23</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 195.

66 fore, what takes place is strictly speaking *no-thing*: the uncanny as the “phenomenon” in all its purity.

This no-thing, although temporarily “gathered round” the vague figure of the woman, is nevertheless that which cannot appear as such on the scene of seeing. The eye that tries to see this invisible/unintelligible has to focus on the figure in order to make it distinct, to make it stand out from the ground, but what it encounters in the process is only more confusion, more haze – this is what is “revealed” when, rather than look at the reflected light, one looks at the sun: light in its might, light that effaces all figures:

She is vanishing. With the rest. The already ill seen bedimmed and ill seen again annulled. The mind betrays the treacherous eyes and the treacherous word their treacheries. Haze sole certitude. The same that reigns beyond the pastures. It gains them already. It will gain the zone of stones. Then the dwelling through all its chinks. The eye will close in vain. To see but haze. Not even. Be itself but haze. How can it ever be said? Quick how ever ill said before it submerges all. Light. In one treacherous word. Dazzling haze. Light in its might at last. Where no more to be seen. To be said. (88)

What cannot be seen as the object is that which allows the seeing of the object, that is to say, light. However, “not the light that appears (*lumen*) by clinging to surfaces, but the light that flashes (*lux*) and that causes to appear, itself nonapparent as such. *Lux* without *fiat*, having neither creator, subject, nor source, being the source but in itself refracted, in itself radiant, exploding, broken.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, in order to erase itself – to erase itself as the very figure of seeing – the eye does not only have to annihilate what is seen (seeing nothing but haze it would still see itself seeing) but it has to *become* the haze, that is to say, annihilate itself as seeing. In this way, what cannot be figured, the mimetic, is once again made by Beckett into a relationship of figures, but this time both figures (the woman and the eye) are put on the scene only to be effaced by themselves – what we are left with is the inexplicable state of confusion. Again, as in *Company*, we are given a figure, but one that is not a figure of knowledge. What is figured in this figure is something vague and monstrous that cannot be turned into a meaning – it does not explain anything; on the contrary, it is the figure of confusion whose sole function is to bar the production of meaning.

The absolute evacuation of the scene is, however, only the *dream* of the eye, the dream that keeps reappearing throughout the text. To quote one more example:

Let her vanish. And the rest. For good. And the sun. Last rays. And the moon. And Venus. Nothing left but black sky. White earth. Or inversely. No more sky

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<sup>24</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 33.

or earth. Finished high and low. Nothing but black and white. Everywhere no matter where. But black. Void. Nothing else. Contemplate that. Not another word. Home at last. Gently gently. (75)

Yet the next paragraph starts: “Panic past pass on. The hands. Seen from above. They rest on the pubis intertwined,” and there continues the description of the scene of seeing. Similarly, the final images of *Ill Seen Ill Said* render the moment of such panic:

First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glut-ton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of car-rion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness. (97)

Yet *no* happiness awaits. The reason for this lies in the fact that mimesis is its own *movement* among forms/figures that are not pre-mimetic but that arise from it (repetition and mimesis are originary). Although the mimetic does not usually present itself but remains the “ground” against which figures appear, as we have already seen, it is possible in writing, with some ingenuity, to turn this ground into a figure, but it is a figure *that is not an image*, it is a “second degree” figure, a figure of the absence of figure, and therefore a figure of the strange(r). Yet such figuring is possible only with the help of a figure (of the woman, of the scene of seeing, etc.) which is effaced in the process of turning the ground of this figure into a figure. Therefore, the effaced figure always *remains within the ground turned into a figure, precisely in the position of being its ground* – after the process of effacing wipes out all the sensible/intelligible from the figure, it remains as the vestige, pure difference, trace, or, to be more precise, *the very tracing of the trace* (the movement of mimesis). Thus, we can say that there is no ground *as such* or that the only “ground” for all figures lies in their differences – in the process of production, that is to say, repetition, a figure can always become a ground for its ground and, by these means, turn its ground into a figure. Yet, because the figuration described here cannot be turned into a homogenous image, such a “ground” or trace is *never one*; it is the multiplicity of grounds and figures that has its already refracted source in the originary repetition – what we are used to calling mimesis is, in its essence, a *heterogenesis*.<sup>25</sup> This is precisely what the eye dreads (if it is dread), but that from which it can never escape:

Absence supreme good and yet. Illumination then go again and on return no more trace. On earth’s face. Of what was never. And if by mishap some left then go again. For good again. So on. Till no more trace. On earth’s face. Instead of always the same place. Slaving away forever in the same place. At this and that trace. And what if the eye could not? No more tear itself away from the remains of trace. Of what was never. (96)

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<sup>25</sup> Nancy, *The Muses*, pp. 24–26.

68 The eye cannot. No happiness to know, then.

But, leaving aside for a while the matters of mimesis and figuration, there is also one more question that remains to be asked here: is the sex (if it is sex) of the apparition a matter of accident? Although the figure of the woman does not immediately reveal the unrevealable, that is, the monstrous, nevertheless, in the final analysis, it becomes the site of its support within the region of the visible. Is there anything feminine (which, in such a situation, would also have to mean inhuman) in this kind of monstration? We do not have to search very far to find clues. The one at hand, and perhaps the most famous, is aphorism 361 of *The Gay Science*:

Falseness with a good conscience; the delight in simulation exploding as a power that pushes aside one's so-called "character," flooding it and at times extinguishing it; the inner craving for a role and mask, for *appearance*; an excess of the capacity for all kinds of adaptations that can no longer be satisfied in the service of the most immediate and narrowest utility – all of this is perhaps not only peculiar to the actor?<sup>26</sup>

The creatures Nietzsche has in mind are all those who can be rumoured not to display or possess any stable property, all those who are perceived as the ones who present themselves as what they are not, the "human agents" that can become everyone but who are, in themselves, no one – without "character," without proper "interiority." This "lack of qualities" is characteristic (in the aphorism) not only of the actor but also of two other paradigmatic figures of western civilisation: the Jew and the woman. It is in them that pure mimeticism finds its impersonation – they are the perfect mimeticians whose dissimulating proficiencies are guaranteed by their missing content. The woman – and here Nietzsche is, of course, the mouthpiece of a long tradition of representing the Woman – does not resemble herself but always already masks herself. This is her very essence: she *is* a perpetual flight from herself. Although she is "somebody," her being just an empty form of identity does not let her be identified or recognised. Being thus a perfect figure of nobody, she is an immaculately faceless image: "*no one – in person*,"<sup>27</sup> monstrous and uncanny.

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Among the texts of the "trilogy," *Worstward Ho* is without doubt the most difficult to read. But the difficulty does not originate in the proliferation of seemingly unrelated images, in a language which is full of literary tropes or some muddled intelligence behind the process of creation. It comes, para-

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<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 316.

<sup>27</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 119.



doxically, from the author's determination and singularity of purpose: since words (or more generally speaking, writing, the process of signification) create for us the world in the figures of knowledge, the only sensible way to escape figures, the only way that leaves some hope of eventual success, consists not of trying to avoid speaking with figures in the sense of "doing theory" – because theory is this exactly: thinking in figures, schematising – but of trying to "unsay" these very figures, using words in order to destroy what words produce.

On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.

Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for be missaid. (101)

This, of course, brings us back to the site we already know: the originary scene of philosophy. Here, the word has no function to fulfil during the exposure to the idea/figure; the contact with pure intelligibility is sheer (in)sight which words can only dilute. Being the products of representation, belonging to the world of the senses, they destabilise and defer the self-same exposed in presence. *Words worsen (in)sight* and this is precisely what the narrating voice clings to as its chance. The images are to be reduced as far as language permits:

Worse less. By no stretch more. Worse for want of better less. Less best. No. Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worst. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unless-  
enable least best worse. (118)

But this type of narrative is one that never allows itself the opportunity to unfold into any kind of coherent continuum. There is no development here; the narrative progresses in fits and starts, it keeps rupturing itself every few steps, all the time contradicting what it has just happened to say. And even if this incoherence produces a passage (like the above) with a teleology of its own, we very soon get lost in a tangle of words that are minimally different from each other and which keep being repeated over and over again with only slight variation. Because of that, in order to proceed further while not losing track of what is being said, we have to keep coming back to the sentences or even particular words we have just read and to which the repetitions send us back.<sup>28</sup> In this way, and paradoxically, what is not strictly speaking the narrative – that is, the interruptions – seems to become the "more important" part of the narrative (even in the sense of being more time-consuming than the "story" itself). But the movement forward, however slowed down it is, is never

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<sup>28</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, p. 86.



70 stalled – therefore, there must be some “thread” along which the “story” progresses. The narration is constantly interrupted, but these interruptions, in order to function as a narrative, have to be retied again in the reader’s consciousness as his eyes follow down the page. Yet this tying together itself keeps being ruptured by the constant returning to the previous parts of the narration that the text demands in order for one not to lose one’s way in the shifting sands of Beckett’s convoluted language. We can say that what seems to be retied in such a process of reading is not only the severed “threads” of the narrative (as some “story” that takes place between the beginning and the end of the book) but the very ruptures in narration themselves<sup>29</sup> – the narrative consists not only of the “events” it describes but also of the “story” of its reading, that is to say, the story of its being ruptured. No wonder that the experience of such a reading strikes many as peculiar.

But who is the one that speaks here, who is the one that ruptures himself speaking? The text is careful not to name him:

Whose words? Ask in vain. Or not in vain if say no knowing. No saying. No words for him whose words. Him? One. No words for one whose words. One? It. No words for it whose words. Better worse so. (109–110)

The one who speaks possesses no identity, and it is not even certain whether the one “whose words” is animate or not. “It” is properly speaking both No-one and No-thing – not only are there no words to figure it but also there is no way to approach it as either human or object. We are not coming across this inhuman “figure” for the first time and we are going to come back to it again.

As does every text, this one also has to invent ways to progress “somehow on.” Thus, the process of producing figures inevitably begins.

Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still. (101)

It stands. See in the dim void at last it stands. In the dim light source unknown. (103)

To this first figure soon another one is added:

Another. Say another. Head sunk on crippled hands. Vertex vertical. Eyes clenched. Seat of all. Germ of all. (103)

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<sup>29</sup> Derrida uses the concept of “re-knotted” ruptures in his second essay on Levinas; Jacques Derrida, “At this very moment in this work here I am,” in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (London: Athlone Press, 1991).

Where then but there see now another. Bit by bit an old man and child. In the dim void bit by bit an old man and child. Any other would do as ill.

Hand in hand with equal plod they go. (105)

But, as we have already mentioned, the figures are not invented just to be marvelled at – the moment they are established the process of “worsening” might begin. And so the standing figure is soon found: “Kneeling. Better kneeling. Better worse kneeling” (107); then reduced to: “Nothing but a bowed back. Topless baseless hindtrunk” (111); finally, and much further along in the text, this back is said to belong to a woman: “Nothing to show a woman’s and yet a woman’s.” (120) The twain, at first, plod on holding hands; then, “gone held holding hands they plod apart” (119); until they become separated by the measureless void: “Two once so one. From now rift a vast. Vast of void atween.” (124) A similar reduction happens to the third figure – at the beginning it is: “Another. [...] Head sunk on crippled hands” (103); then the image is reduced:

Those hands! That head! [...] Away. Full face from now. No hands. No face. Skull and stare alone. (112)

Further on in the text, the skull gets reduced to only the eyes: “Now say the fore alone. No dome. Temple to temple only” (120); and later, to a single orifice:

Try better worse set in skull. Two black holes in foreskull. Or one. Try better still worse one. One dim black hole mid-foreskull. (126)

All these figures, apart from being intentionally “worsened” by the narrative voice, have the habit of fading intermittently, yet their disappearance is only temporary – they always come back. This happens because the final disappearance of figures cannot be effectuated from within the process of figure production, where the figures come and go, where they can be either produced or reduced; it can only be accomplished by the destruction of precisely that which cannot go: the very production itself, potentiality, productive ground.

Simply be there again. There in that head in that head. Clenched eyes clamped to it alone. Alone? No. Too. To it too. The sunken skull. The crippled hands. Clenched staring eyes. Clenched eyes clamped to clenched staring eyes. (111)

The skull, that is to say, the stare, is “[s]cene and seer of all.” (112) Therefore, it must have the structure of a double gesture: it is both the scene (what is

72 seen) and what sees (the seer). It sees the figures of the kneeling woman and the twain. It has also, if it wants to represent itself, to project itself as a figure within the field of the other figures – this creates the figure of the skull and all its “worsened” incarnations. But in order to be conscious of itself as figure, the stare has to be of a double nature – it cannot only see something, it also has to *see itself as seeing* (that is, of course, producing seeing); hence, the process of figuration is also figurally doubled: a skull within a skull, the eyes clamped to the eyes. Thus, to go back for a while to the dream of the narrator, there is no finality in disappearance: even if all the figures go (the trunk, the twain, the skull/stare) there is something that cannot go – it is seeing itself.

What does the eye see if figures abscond? It sees the void. This void is that which opens – the field of vision alone:

The void. Unchanging. Say now unchanging. Void where not the one [the trunk]. The twain. [...]

The void. Before the staring eyes. Stare where they may. Far and wide. High and low. The narrow field. Know no more. See no more. Say no more. That alone. That little much of void alone. (108–109)

But the void does not form a background, in the sense of a consolidated field – what happens here is not the standing out of figures against some stable backdrop, not the lifting of the figure that lets itself be lifted from its ground. The reason for this is the division within the field of seeing. The field is not one and stabilised – there is an incision that complicates matters:

Dim whence unknown. At all costs unknown. Unchanging. Say now unchanging. Say a pipe in that void. A tube. Sealed. Then in that pipe or tube that selfsame dim. Old dim. When ever what else? Where all always to be seen. Of the nothing to be seen. Dimly seen. Nothing ever unseen. Of the nothing to be seen. (113)

What such a gulf or – to use a better fitting figure for a site of production – invagination<sup>30</sup> in and of the ground accomplishes is to make this ground differ from itself as ground and, therefore, to make it remove itself of itself. Taking into consideration that it is in this way that the ground accomplishes its dislocation, we can say that escaping itself is the ground’s very nature: it is a ground that withdraws.<sup>31</sup> Here, then, we have another example of a self-effacing Beckettian figure, but, while in the previous works Beckett

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Living On/Border Lines,” p. 98 and *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy, *Muses*, p. 32.

has already used images to figure the unrevealable, and although these figures were not the figures of knowledge, in the sense that they rather obstructed the understanding of a scene than helped it, in *Worstward Ho* he goes a bit further: not only is the invisible/unfigurable figured (although dimly) but there is also *the figure for the impossibility of that figure of invisibility as whole*. In these images nothing to be seen – what is never to be seen, that is to say, the double origin of seeing – is seen in the figure of the invaginated field of seeing: paradoxically, nothing remains unseen of the nothing to be seen.

But what makes such a feat possible? If repetition is re-presented in the figure of the “pipe in the void” we cannot speak about the *unrepresentable* vestige of re-presentation. If the whole process of re-presentation can be reappropriated within the figural language, if everything, even nothing itself, can be assigned a figure, then we are back within the Hegelian dream of philosophy that is already present at its own birth, philosophy as “absolute (in)sight, the subject theorising its own conception and engendering itself in seeing itself do so – the speculative.”<sup>32</sup> If there is nothing unrepresentable that remains in the process of representation we can say that ultimately Beckett *succeeded* in representing the deferred origin of the subject and, therefore, brought his task to its fulfilment. He has failed to fail because his failure was forced to pronounce itself to have some meaning – e.g. he failed to represent the sensible, but only in order to represent the deeper structures, that is, the ways we construct the sensible: the origin of signification. Yet does this really happen in *Worstward Ho*? The words act in a peculiar way:

Remains of mind then still. [...] Enough still not to know. Not to know what they say. Not to know what it is the words it [the narrative voice] says say. Says? Secretes. Say better worse secretes. What it is the words it secretes say. What the so-said void. The so-said dim. The so-said shades [the trunk and the twain]. The so-said seat and germ of all [the skull/sight]. Enough to know no knowing. No knowing what it is the words it secretes say. No saying. No saying what it all is they somehow say. (116–117)

There seems to be a more precise term than “to say” for what words accomplish – this term is “to secrete.” Its meaning is at least double and almost contradictory: on the one hand it means “to produce by means of secretion,” on the other, “to place in concealment, to keep secret.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, if words “secrete,” they accomplish a double gesture – what happens in saying is the unveiling of sense (a figure as something to be seen) but at the same time this unveiling uncovers its ground as veiled. *There is no knowing what it is*

<sup>32</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 127.

<sup>33</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), II, p. 2702.

74 *the words say, because there is no saying (no figuring) what it is they somehow say.* The meaning of the figure of the pipe can be known as it is said, but is there a meaning in the very *saying* of the words that mean, that is to say, represent (e.g. the pipe)? The figure of the pipe is, as we have said, the figure of pure repetition, of a ground that is not the ground in the sense of being stable and one. But by being re-presented as the pipe such a ground is no longer itself – it becomes schematised, theorised and subsumed under the aegis of knowledge. Yet there is something in *Worstward Ho* that does not represent the repetition and the division within itself as an originary “event.” This something which is not re-presented but *presented* in the text is precisely *repetition and division itself*.

We have already said that *Worstward Ho* is a “difficult” book, and that its difficulty consists of precisely this: it displays the very *physicality* of words as that which it is difficult to get through; the words put on “weight,” they are more than just receptacles of the intelligible sense to be grasped and directed towards some goal. And most often it is repetition, among other techniques, that gives them such “weight.” Take this as an example:

What when words gone? None for what then. But say by way of somehow on somehow with sight to do. With less of sight. Still dim and yet – No. Nohow so on. Say better worse words gone when nohow on. Still dim and nohow on. All seen and nohow on. What words for what then? None for what then. No words for what when words gone. For what when nohow on. Somehow nohow on. (115–116)

What is exposed here is language on the verge of collapsing into itself – in obstinately repeating its forms and sounds this language seems to postpone meaning in favour of sound effects like rhyme and alliteration. Although this passage (like the rest of *Worstward Ho*) is not completely void of meaning, there is nothing to be gained – in terms of knowledge<sup>34</sup> – from such a paragraph: we already know that the text wants to missay its figures and we do not have to go through the ordeal of rereading the passage several times in order to grasp all its turns of phrase. But it is here that the crux of the matter of representation lies, because in such fragments (and *Worstward Ho* consists mainly of similar paragraphs) what stands out in its very strangeness is the materiality of words as such, what in words is not the intelligible form but the pure “substance” of the physical, the “wax” of language, *malleability itself*. And it is precisely this that cannot be converted into the intelligible figure, it is the “rest” that remains unfigured even if the very process of signification is theorised by the work that is produced by it. Thus, even such ingenious a writing as Beckett’s fails – there is always something in language that does not allow itself to be turned into a meaning.

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<sup>34</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, p. 85.

It is the very stuff of *Worstward Ho* that demands effort<sup>35</sup> but the struggle with the monstrous surface of the text allows the word to stand out as pure presentation of form that signifies only itself and which does not refer us to a model. Therefore, what the writer is doing in performing such a gesture, is playing at being the Creator – in writing, he mimes the origin of the world. Yet since there is no outside of the world, there is nothing to *copy* here – this world is here and it is the best one not because it is superior to another but precisely because there is only this one and no other. Therefore, the writer does not reenact the origin; by committing an originary gesture “he plays at the posture that has never taken place and that will never take place, since there is no outside the world.”<sup>36</sup> But, in spite of all, with a gesture like that he makes this very same impossibility of the outside loom up. Such an apparition *divides* the writer and catches him by surprise: “*he surprises himself absent* just as the author of the world is absent. He thus surprises the world in its nudity of being or of a being without author.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, what comes to be announced in the “figure” (or, rather, apparition) of the absent author/creator is something properly monstrous, something that remains a stranger *in* the world, that is to say, the fact that *there is world* (and word), although there is no creator. Form interrupts the continuity of being and presents us with the world as that which is patent – it presents us with *the obvious itself*. We have to emphasise once again that such presentation of presentation, such appearing of appearing of the world (that is, the original repetition again) is not given in representation – since the subject in his pseudo-originary gesture surprises himself as absent, he finds that his interiority is always already divided, and therefore is not the interiority in the proper sense; he finds that he is always already at large in the outside. For this reason the presentation of the world as patency does not take place for a consolidated subject or in such a subject because it is precisely its inside which is found to be out already, to be this patency, to be world and the approaching monster.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the “figure” of a stranger that comes towards us in the coming of the world is never a figure of humanity. The monster is always the inhuman and this in a double sense. First, it never takes place for a subject (that is to say, for a subject understood in its “classical,” integrated sense); second, and following from the first, it is

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<sup>35</sup> This is generally true about all of Beckett’s prose works, especially those beginning with *How It Is*.

<sup>36</sup> Nancy, *Muses*, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> Nancy, *Muses*, p. 77; italics mine.

<sup>38</sup> A similar “event,” in which “disfocussed” (rather than disintegrated: if we understand the subject in a wider sense than Cartesian/Husserlian categories, the subject is never completely wiped out) intentionality seems to undergo reversal and it appears that it is things that are watching us and not the other way round, can be found in Levinas (and also Blanchot): “Wakefulness (*la veille*) is anonymous. It is not that there is *my* vigilance in the night; in insomnia it is the night itself that watches (*qui veille*). It watches (*ça veille*).” [*La veille* is both wakefulness and watchfulness.] (Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), p. 66 / *De l’existence à l’existant* (Paris: Vrin, 1986), p. 111).

76 never a figure of knowledge. What comes to the surface in presentation, in the monstration of *there is*, is nothing not already “known.” What is unveiled here is *no secret*, not anything that has lain hidden, but something that is always spread everywhere upon the surface of the world, as that which constitutes this surface: the surfacing of the world, its very obviousness.

There is, however, one reservation: a stranger is never “the” stranger.

As we have seen, it is impossible to hear the originary voice behind the text, because the text’s origin extends into infinity. Because an author is always a figure produced by the text, no author is ever begotten of itself; they are all made, produced in reception. Since there are different ways of saying a word or putting a word on paper, each time there are other words that can be used and other stories to be told; each time the voice differs, each time it is distinct as having its own tone and shape, its own unique *form*. Because of this diversity, that is to say, because “literature lacks *inherent* voice,”<sup>39</sup> with every monstration the features of the monster are different, since each time there is a different monster present there. One monster never resembles another because – as it is that which shows nothing apart from the manner of showing, nothing apart from the showing of the way the absence of figure is configured – being “the monster and the monstrator of resemblance” it itself resembles nothing.<sup>40</sup> The monster is not the stranger or the other as such – it is “this other of the other which never reappears as the same thing,”<sup>41</sup> it is that which, being finite (as all form is finite), infinitises itself in multiplication. Where there are only strangers, and not “the” stranger, the stranger cannot be identified and the essence of the form permanently defers its identity – this is precisely the reason why the general poetics of the word has never been and never will be possible. In other words: the formation of form (the monstration of the monster) is such that one is never finished, never done with it – writing is the presentation of finitude (form) by means of finitude (form) but whose division is infinite.<sup>42</sup>

It is in this light that we have to look at the announcements of the end of literature of which Beckett is supposed to be an especially clear example. What escapes the attention of most of the critics who bemoan the disintegration of this writing is that one of the gravest “failures” of Beckett is his failure to fail. Although his unremitting assault on the sources of narrativity might have borne some bitter fruit both for the proponents of the humanity of arts and for those who are after the truth hidden in art from the gaze of the illiterate, he never ceased to show, by the practice of his writing, that the

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<sup>39</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy, *Muses*, p. 79.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Sharing Voices” in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 246.

<sup>42</sup> Nancy, “Sharing Voices,” p. 247.

only thing that literature has to teach us is that it *is*, and this only means that it multiplies itself without end. In this sense only can he be said to search for silence and “all to end.” He knew there is no rest in silence, because silence is the very silence of the multiplication of forms – it neither precedes nor succeeds speech: it is “the tension of speech, the vibration that lets no meaning weigh down or weigh in.”<sup>43</sup> Silence is nothing, yet this nothing is not a something – it is a silent force that exposes everything, the only obvious “truth” which lies on the surface of things: what is just is – meaningless, finite, yet, in its finitude, truly infinite.

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<sup>43</sup> Nancy, *Muses*, p. 73.





## Nauman: Deprivation and Overload<sup>1</sup>

In 1967, after a couple of apprenticeship years as a sculptor using polyester resin, fiberglass and similar materials, Bruce Nauman comes up with a completely new type of work – a spiral neon sign proclaiming: “The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths.”<sup>2</sup> What can one do with such a sentence? On the one hand, it is quite ridiculous, a mockery of the 19th century “religion of art” and all that goes with it, both aesthetically and socially. On the other, the artist who is serious about what he does (which may just as well include self-deprecating or self-mocking gestures) has somehow to believe in it, because there is no point in being an artist if one does not feel that art can be of import for the lives of other people. Therefore a sentence like the above puts the mind on edge – “[i]t’s true and it’s not true at the same time.”<sup>3</sup> It also sparks off a potentially infinite series of questions. If such a statement about the role of the artist is absurd, what does it mean to be an artist? If he does not reveal mystic truths, what is he supposed to do? And so on and so forth. In fact, attempts to answer these questions spawned much of 20th century art. But, if we, for a moment, remain with the 19th century, which, in spite of later disclaimers, indelibly marked subsequent western European attitudes to artistic production, we can safely say that the traditional answer here would be: the artist (or rather genius, because only the genius is a worthwhile artist) is supposed to *express individually*. Expression is the revelation of mystic truths, but at the same time, and paradoxically, it is also a *self-revelation* in the unique mode of a particular genius. In other words, *The*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Artists Rights Society, New York, representing Bruce Nauman, for permission to reproduce his works discussed in this chapter without any charge. However, because many of the galleries that own Nauman’s works ask exorbitant fees for the same thing, which this type of publication cannot afford, the works will not be reproduced here. Most of them can easily be found on the Internet.

<sup>2</sup> The work did not come out of nowhere; it is related to a couple of other works Nauman had done the previous year. One of them is a transparent rose-coloured Mylar window or wall shade bearing the inscription “The true artist is an amazing luminous fountain.”

<sup>3</sup> Nauman quoted in Robert Storr, “Beyond Words” in *Bruce Nauman (Exhibition Catalogue and Catalogue Raisonné)*, ed. Joan Simon (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1994), p. 62.

80 *True Artist Is an Amazing Luminous Fountain*, which is indeed the leading motif of a number of Nauman's works done around the same time, one of them being a photograph which presents him squatting in the bushes in an overgrown backyard garden spurting a jet of water from his mouth (entitled *The Artist as a Fountain*). The photograph is black and white and "plain" (it uses no "aesthetic effects," like special lighting or filters), as if it had been taken by an amateur accidentally, which makes for a much stronger statement than its more famous and much-reproduced colour twin, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (prettier and "technically refined"). Squatting in the bushes is an obvious obscene reference in the context of artistic "fountainism": art as self-revelation may be understood as indecent exposure, which may oscillate between the artist's narcissistic self-presentation (*Self-Portrait as a Fountain* as a pretty artistic object) and the public's forced intrusion in the backyard at the moment of taking a shit (*The Artist as a Fountain*). Yet, whatever the artist's or public's motives are, self-exposure, being obscene, is at the same time also *cruel*, even if self-inflicted. As Nauman will say in one of his most important works of the 1970s: "People die of exposure."<sup>4</sup>

We arrive here at a particularly sensitive spot of artistic creation: self-exposure is painful and should be avoided (the true artist is *not* an amazing luminous fountain), but impersonal professional "production" is an equally bad solution (the true artist *does* help the world by revealing mystic truths). The question raised in this context seems to be: can an artist's work be *personal* without becoming *narcissistic*? And how is one to accomplish that? Can expression be divorced from self-revelation? And by what means?

For Nauman, tentative answers to such questions will come out of the works done around the same time as those discussed above. What links them together is their relation to the artist's body – what can be more personal than one's own physicality? But the body is meant here neither in a humanist sense with its symbolic set of meanings and functions, nor its phenomenological constitution which is a first step to humanist self-definition, and especially not in its anatomical and medical make-up depersonalising it into a mechanism perpetuating its own rules.<sup>5</sup> One has to avoid the practices of all these discourses in order to use one's body personally, yet not obscenely. Nauman approaches this task in two ways. Firstly, he tries to desymbolise the body by means of *abstracting* it (sometimes with large amounts of auto-irony added to that). The body might be rendered abstract by means of *deprivation*, as in *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals* (1966) where the templates remain the abstracted sign of the absent body of the disappeared model-author; or its personal signifiers may undergo the pro-

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<sup>4</sup> *The Consummate Mask of Rock* (1975). All of the motifs mentioned here: narcissism, exposure, cruelty, even defecation, will unexpectedly (?) resurface after twenty years in a completely different context in a very violent work entitled *Clown Torture* (see further).

<sup>5</sup> Coosje van Bruggen, "Sounddance" in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 44.

cess of *overloading*, as in *My Last Name Exaggerated Fourteen Times Vertically* (1967) where the exaggeration makes it impossible to read the name and so turns it into an abstract pattern.<sup>6</sup> However, this technique stays basically on the negative side of “artistic subject critique” without presenting anything positively personal that would go with it.

An “affirmative” procedure, which will feature strongly in Nauman’s work, grew out of the questions we began with, that Nauman started to ask himself at the beginning of his career in his empty San Francisco studio:

The first real change came after I had a studio. I was working very little, teaching a class one night a week, and I didn’t know what to do with all that time. I think that’s when I did the first casts of my body and the name parts and things like that. There was nothing in the studio because I didn’t have much money for materials. So I was forced to examine myself, and what I was doing there.<sup>7</sup>

And what he was doing was pacing a lot, drinking coffee and performing other ordinary activities, which slowly started becoming the subjects of his work. We witness here another ironic edge of a statement that simultaneously is and is not true: art is what an artist does in his studio. More or less ordinary simple activities are turned into Nauman’s works, which were originally intended as performances, but ended up being films (and later videos) made in the artist’s studio.<sup>8</sup> Performances presented in *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 1*,<sup>9</sup> *Bouncing Two Balls between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms*,<sup>10</sup> *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square*,<sup>11</sup> *Stamping in*

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Goodman, “From Hand to Mouth to Paper to Art: The Problems of Bruce Nauman’s Drawings” in Morgan, *Nauman*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Willoughby Sharp, “Two Interviews” in Morgan, *Nauman*, p. 237.

<sup>8</sup> “When I was living in San Francisco, I had several performance pieces which no museum or gallery was interested in presenting. I could have rented a hall, but I didn’t want to do it that way. So I made films of the pieces, the bouncing balls and others. Then we moved to New York, and it was harder to get film equipment. So I got the video-tape equipment, which is a lot more straightforward to work with.” (Sharp, “Two Interviews,” p. 243)

<sup>9</sup> “For this videotape, Nauman turned the camera sideways and positioned it so that his head is cropped from the frame and his body is presented from neck to ankles. As he stands in the corner, his back to the wall, he appears to be lying down; falling backwards into the corner and then pushing himself off the wall again, he appears to be trying to levitate himself [...]. As he performs these actions, his hands slam into the wall to break his falls, and the sounds become an integral part of the activities filmed.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 219; all the descriptions of Nauman’s works come from the Catalogue Raisonné included there.)

<sup>10</sup> “In this film Nauman bounces two balls in the center of a square marked by tape on the studio floor. He throws them as hard as he can, trying to maintain a specific pattern, but the balls ricochet out of control as his moves become correspondingly jumpy and unpredictable. [...] The sound and image are out of sync because he ‘didn’t have the equipment and patience’ to coordinate them.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 219)

<sup>11</sup> “For this film, Nauman made a square of masking tape on the studio floor, with each side marked at its half point. To the sound of a metronome and beginning at one corner, he

82 *the Studio*,<sup>12</sup> and other works are recorded actions in which Nauman's body is used in a "meaningless" way. They intend no representation, suggestion or commentary; they are performed "for themselves." In order to emphasise this, the films are looped, which gets rid of any narrative impulses that might accidentally present themselves there.<sup>13</sup> Endless repetition empties the films of all meanings, since expectation – which structures a story in a specific (symbolic) way – is abolished. Moreover, the films are made in such a way that the body is abstracted visually: the camera may be placed upside down or on the side, there may be extreme close up involved (e.g. *Lip Sync*),<sup>14</sup> or extreme slow motion (e.g. *Gauze*),<sup>15</sup> or the framing may exclude Nauman's head (the face is the most expressive human part) from the view (e.g. *Bouncing in the Corner*, Nos. 1 and 2). All of this adds to the "mental" abstraction of the body which signifies nothing and tells no story. The interesting point is that, although we are dealing here with abstraction, this is not abstraction in the usual sense, whether geometrical or expressive, but extreme abstraction going hand in hand with extreme naturalistic representation (film and even more video are taken to be the most mimetic media) and in effect annulling each other. What is more, these seemingly pointless exercises, which nevertheless demand a lot of effort, might, in the final analysis, have some meaning to them, but a meaning (if one can call it this) which is not of the representative or symbolic order at all. This is what Nauman has to say about them:

If you really believe in what you're doing and do it as well as you can, then there will be a certain amount of tension – if you are honestly getting tired, or if you are honestly trying to balance on one foot for a long time, there has to be a certain sympathetic response in someone who is watching you. It is a kind of body response, they feel that foot and that tension.<sup>16</sup>

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methodically moves around the perimeter of the square, sometimes facing into its interior, sometimes out. Each pace is the equivalent of half the length of a side of the taped square." (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 221)

<sup>12</sup> "For this work, Nauman pounds out rhythms with his feet that increase in complexity as he paces his studio, beginning with a steady one-two beat and advancing to a syncopated ten-beat phrase. As he stamps back and forth across the studio, he moves diagonally and in spirals. The camera is upside down, and the action is thus inverted in the frame [...]" (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 227)

<sup>13</sup> Robert C. Morgan, "Interview with Bruce Nauman" in Morgan, *Nauman*, p. 266.

<sup>14</sup> "With the camera mounted upside down, framing only his mouth and neck, Nauman repeats the phrase 'lip sync' over and over in a loud whisper. Sound and image are intentionally unsynchronized, while the upside-down view of his lips and tongue in action provides a further disorienting quality to the work." (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 233)

<sup>15</sup> "In this film, Nauman, bit by bit, pulls five or six yards of gauze from his mouth. [...] [I]t is one of four 'Slo-Mo' films that he shot with an industrial high speed camera. The highly distended action is shown in extreme close-up, and was filmed with the camera placed upside down. The resulting inverted image causes Nauman's face to appear distorted." (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 233)

<sup>16</sup> Sharp, "Two Interviews," p. 256.

What we have here is a kind of identification, yet not that which is the propelling force of mass culture (what draws the audience “inside” a Hollywood film is identification with a character as a “person” and his or her “feelings,” which involves symbolic representations of unrequited love, conquering masculinity, etc.), but some sort of “bodily togetherness” between a performer and the audience, which is not based on meaningful, symbolic representation. Since the performer does not express his “interiority” here, the audience does not have anything to hold on to symbolically apart from the mere physical presence of his body, which is at the same time this particular personal body, and yet is devoid of all expressive power that could assign some meaning to its tortuous actions.

The questions involved in this kind of work become even more radicalised when the activity to be performed is usually connected with some professional skill as, for instance, playing an instrument. Speaking about a film called *Violin Tuned DEAD* (ordinary tuning is G D A E), Nauman comments:

One thing I was interested in was playing ... I wanted to set up a problem where it wouldn't matter whether I knew how to play the violin or not. What I did was to play as fast as I could on all four strings with the violin tuned D, E, A, D. I thought it would just be a lot of noise, but it turned out to be musically very interesting. It is a very tense piece.<sup>17</sup>

The question that arises here is one of the relation between professionalism and dilettantism, and with it another about the meaning of being an artist comes. Should an artist be a professional? A lot of them are, but does being a professional guarantee anything? After all, most of modern art has its roots in Dada, which tried to show that you do not have to be a professional to make art. But being a dilettante does not guarantee artistic quality either, since what a dilettante usually looks for is something that he finds personally pleasurable or interesting (which may amount to the same thing); therefore meaningless actions which demand a lot of effort are not likely to be what he is up to. On the other hand, what makes one a professional (e.g. a professional musician) is a technique one can fall back on, yet what is problematic here is that a technique, like all “mechanisms,” always inserts the same preconceived clichéd solutions to the problems encountered.<sup>18</sup> Dilettantism involves narcissistic pleasure seeking, while professionalism's efficacy is generally based on the impersonal and technical approach. For that reason Nauman gets rid of both pleasure and efficacy in order that, first of all, a problem should appear, and, secondly, that it be encountered *as a problem* (not just a technical obsta-

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<sup>17</sup> Sharp, “Two Interviews,” p. 256.

<sup>18</sup> Speaking of Thelonious Monk's music, somebody said that in his case we had one hundred percent music (Monk was often accused of not being able to play properly), while with other pianist-composers it was about fifty percent music and fifty percent piano (“fast finger” mechanical clichés).

84 cle). If one does not have the needed technique or skills, one has to *struggle* in a region for which one knows *no rules*; so either one goes completely without them, or one has to make them from scratch. In this way the struggle becomes an exercise in endurance – the performance is both mentally and physically exhausting, because one is groping around the territory of one's own body with no preconceived solutions. Nauman comments:

An awareness of yourself comes from a certain amount of activity and you can't get it from just thinking about yourself. You do exercises, you have certain kinds of awareness that you don't have if you read books. So the films and some of the pieces that I did after that for videotapes were specifically about doing exercises in balance. I thought of them as dance problems without being a dancer, being interested in the kinds of tension that arise when you try to balance and can't.<sup>19</sup>

An activity that demands such groping, such non-narrativised, non-coded struggle, makes one aware of oneself as one's body, but this kind of awareness has nothing to do with meaning. And the term "books," as Nauman uses it, stands not only for purely mental processes like reading, but also for all "ritualised" narrative practices of the body, like for instance body-building and fitness training, in which the body loses its material weight or mass completely, and becomes utterly transformed by a given code of narration into a perfectly dematerialised sign (these are "meaningful" activities, which aim at being a perfect piece of a code, e.g. to look the right way). Yet Nauman's aforementioned efforts seem to be only partially successful. In spite of all, the residue of the narcissistic element remains: what is presented as the site of art is the artist's exposed body – and people die of exposure.

To avoid this, Nauman starts hiring performers in order to evacuate his own body from the work. This results in a new situation, because the artist is not able to control the performance in the way he could when he himself did it. Due to the new circumstances his work begins to change – if somebody else is performing, all accidentality and improvisation, strongly present in earlier works (struggle with no rules), have to go. In order to avoid the dilution of the "precision" of his work by the free rein allowed to the performer, the activities called for have to be simple (abstract) and the instructions have to be as clear as possible in order to disallow individual interpretation, by means of which self-expression of the performer would insinuate itself into the work. *Body as a Sphere* may serve here as an example:

Curl your body into the corner of a room. Imagine a point at the center of your body and concentrate on pulling your body in around that point. Then attempt to press that point down into the corner of the room. It should be clear that these are not intended as static positions which are to be held for

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<sup>19</sup> Sharp, "Two Interviews," p. 253.

an hour a day, but mental and physical activities or processes to be carried out. At the start, the performer may need to repeat the exercise several times in order to fill the hour, but at the end of ten days or so, he should be able to extend the execution to a full hour. The number of days required for an uninterrupted hour performance of course depends on the receptivity and training of the performer.<sup>20</sup>

What is most interesting in such a performance is that, firstly, it is not really mental *and* physical activity, that is, exercises concerning both spirit and body performed simultaneously, but that there is absolutely no difference here between the mental and physical exercise – the distinction between them becomes problematic through precisely the erasure of the expressive, that is, symbolic capacity which introduces such divisions. The status of such exercise as bodily is furthermore paradoxical, because, although it is physical, the performer does not move at all. Yet the activity leads to exhaustion, which is caused by a certain physical and mental tension. And “tension” is, as we have seen, a crucial word for Nauman.

An even more interesting example of mental-physical exercise is the instructions for the following performance:

- A. LIE DOWN ON THE FLOOR NEAR THE CENTER OF THE SPACE, FACE DOWN, AND SLOWLY ALLOW YOURSELF TO SINK DOWN INTO THE FLOOR. EYES OPEN.
- B. LIE ON YOUR BACK ON THE FLOOR NEAR THE CENTER OF THE SPACE AND SLOWLY ALLOW THE FLOOR TO RISE UP AROUND YOU. EYES OPEN.<sup>21</sup>

This work was performed and video-taped in 1973 as *Tony Sinking into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down* and *Elke Allowing the Floor to Rise Up over Her*,

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce Nauman, “Notes and Projects” in Morgan, *Nauman*, p. 319.

<sup>21</sup> The instructions continue:

This is a mental exercise. Practice each day for one hour. 1/2 hour for A, then a sufficient break to clear the mind and body, then 1/2 hour practice B.

At first, as concentration and continuity are broken or allowed to stray every few seconds or minutes, simply start over and continue to repeat the exercise until 1/2 hour is used.

The problem is to try to make the exercise continuous and uninterrupted for the full 1/2 hour. That is, to take the full 1/2 hour to A. sink under the floor, or B. to allow the floor to rise completely over you.

In exercise A it helps to become aware of peripheral vision – use it to emphasise the space at the edges of the room and begin to sink below the edges and finally under the floor.

In B. begin to deemphasise peripheral vision – become aware of tunnelling of vision – so that the edges of the space begin to fall away and the center rises up around you.

In each case use caution in releasing yourself at the end of the period of exercise. (Bruce Nauman, “Instructions” in Morgan, *Nauman*, pp. 326–327)



86 *Face Up*. What we see in the films is just the performers lying on the floor, but there is more than that. This is what Nauman says about these works:

I was working on the exercise in the studio for a while and wanted to make a tape of it, a record, to see if you could see what was happening. When I did the things, they made me tired and I felt good when I finished, but they were not relaxing; they took a lot of energy and a lot of concentration and paying attention. [...] I thought it would be nice if somebody else could do it other than myself. [...] The problem was to make the exercise take up the full hour – which I had never been able to do. [...] It became extremely tense: the guy who was trying to sink into the floor started to choke, and almost got the dry heaves. I got pretty scared, and didn't know what to do. I didn't know if I should "wake him up" or what, or if he was kind of sleepwalking. I didn't know if he was physically ill, or if he was really gasping and choking. He finally sat up and kind of controlled himself, and we talked about it. The tape was running, but unfortunately the microphone did not pick it up, but I wish it had because it was really beautiful – he was really scared. He said, "I just tried to do it too fast, and I was afraid I couldn't get out." What had happened was that as his chest began to sink through the floor, it was filled up and he just couldn't breathe any more, so he started to ... choke. [...] He said, "I was afraid to move my hand, because I thought if I moved it some of the molecules would stay there and I would lose it – it would come all apart and I couldn't get it out." Interestingly, the night before, the same thing happened to the girl in the other tape. She broke out into an incredible sweat, and she couldn't breathe. It was pretty scary. It was, first of all, amazing that someone else could do this exercise, that they could even get into it. It was such an intense experience that it was really frightening for both of them to do. As nearly as I can tell, the tapes don't show any of that, which I thought was also interesting.<sup>22</sup>

The physical-mental tension that constitutes the backbone of the work reappears, but what is equally interesting is the way the old questions are reinterpreted here – if the task of a sculptor is to alter matter, is Nauman's work sculptural? Because modelling matter is precisely what happens in them.<sup>23</sup>

But such works also involve a certain difficulty in their aim. On the one hand, they are meaningless, in the sense that they lack expression and representation, yet, on the other hand, they try to "say" something to the spectator or, to be more precise, they try to *do* something to him: what they say is what they do.<sup>24</sup> If this is expression, it is not expression in the mimetic sense, at least. Yet the position of the spectator of such works is awkward because, if the work's message is what it does to you, you will never be sure

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<sup>22</sup> Nauman in Jan Butterfield, "Bruce Nauman: The Center of Yourself," *Arts Magazine* 49, no. 6 (February 1975), pp. 53–54, quoted in Paul Schimmel, "Pay Attention" in Simon, *Nauman*, p. 79.

<sup>23</sup> Schimmel, "Pay Attention," p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Schimmel quoted in Arthur C. Danto, "Bruce Nauman" in Morgan, *Nauman*, p. 147.

what that really is until you become a performer (the “sympathetic response” of the audience, which Nauman speaks about, is rather fragile) – and this is not likely with an ordinary member of the public. Therefore, a more efficient and less “identificatory” kind of work is needed, one that would involve the spectator straightforwardly without any mediation, regardless whether it be the artist himself – against whom the accusation of narcissism might always be raised – or a more “neutral” performer.

In *Double Doors – Projection and Displacement*, it is the spectator who is invited to perform the mental-physical exercise set up by Nauman in the gallery. “For this work, two parallel walls are built four feet apart, each with a doorway, one of which is slightly smaller. [...] The installation is accompanied by a text:

(Image Projection and Displacement) (No Promises) / Stand in the wedge that will allow you to see through the doors and into a further room. / Become aware of the volume displaced by your body. Imagine it filled with water or some gas (helium). / Concentrate fully on this volume as other considerations dissipate (heat, or cold, gravity). / It's not necessary to remain rigid or fixed in position. Form an image of yourself in the further room standing facing away. / Suppose you had just walked through the doors into that room. / Concentrate and try to feel the volume displaced by the image. / Walk through to the other and step into that volume – precisely that displaced image. / Pay attention to the placement of your extremities and those parts you cannot see: your fingers – the back of your neck – the small of your back. / Make your body fit your image.”<sup>25</sup>

As I have tried to suggest, making one's body fit one's image was precisely the point of the activities Nauman invented for his performers, but now it is the spectator who is asked to perform. And it is really an ultimatum: either you do precisely what I tell you or the work will remain “silent.” The slightly ironic emphasis on the attention that should be paid to the extremities and parts that one cannot see (this is not an exercise in visualisation) underscores the conscious effort to erase the difference between the mental image of one's body and its physical mass or volume. If it is achieved, the perfect match results in a meaningless, non-expressive, yet personal body, whereas any remaining rift allows for ever greater symbolisation-expression-representation governed by the rules of narcissism and convention (which, in this context, amount to the same thing: self-revelation is the aesthetic convention of the 19th century).

As in cases of hired performers, the involvement of the spectator does not allow him to become “inventive” (as happens in works in which an artist provides the audience with certain raw materials and they are allowed to manipulate them freely).<sup>26</sup> This is quite understandable, since free manipu-

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<sup>25</sup> Simon, *Nauman*, p. 259.

<sup>26</sup> Nauman: “I mistrust audience participation. That's why I try to make these works as limiting as possible.” (Sharp, “Two Interviews,” p. 235)

88 lation would automatically bring back the questions of expression of the manipulating subject and this is precisely the situation that Nauman's work is intent to destroy. So audience participation is based either on the setting up of a situation described in *precise instructions*, as in the case of *Double Doors*, or on putting the spectator in a *constricting environment*, which allows only these reactions that the artist has planned. The most familiar examples here are Nauman's series of narrow corridors that the spectator is supposed to enter (of which the most interesting may be *Live-Taped Video Corridor*),<sup>27</sup> *Going Round the Corner Piece*,<sup>28</sup> and *Acoustic Wedge (Sound Wedge – Double Wedge)*,<sup>29</sup> which is also a corridor but a V-shaped one, padded with sound-deadening material, the effect of which is that, as you walk into it, the further you go the stronger the pressure that is exerted on your ears and, as it affects also the rest of your body, you are subject to a kind of synesthetic experience in which you seem to feel the space with your ears (!).<sup>30</sup>

All of these works are very successful if we take into consideration Nauman's original predicament of wanting to be personal but to avoid self-exposure. Each of them is *personal*, because the situation which the spectator experiences is down to the smallest detail invented and arranged by the artist who makes it so constricted that the effects on the participant will be only the ones that the artist wants him to experience (Nauman is the "origin" of what takes place). Yet the work is not expressive or self-revelatory, because the effect of the work does not allow you to identify with Nauman in any way. The "meaning" of the work is what it does to you, so it is set up to make you examine *your own* feelings and reactions (not the artist's) in the face of the situation.<sup>31</sup> And because of the lack of expressive meaning, which is

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<sup>27</sup> "A video camera with wide-angle lens is mounted ten feet above the floor, just outside the opening of a long, narrow corridor. Two monitors are stacked on the floor at the far end of the corridor. The top one displays a live image from the closed-circuit video camera; the bottom one continuously plays a prerecorded videotape of the empty corridor from the same perspective. As the visitor walks deeper into the corridor, his or her image on the monitor (seen from above and behind) appears to move farther away and diminish in size, reflecting the viewer's actual movement away from the camera." (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 247)

<sup>28</sup> "This work calls for a square room to be built with walls ten feet high and twenty feet long, painted white. At one corner of each exterior wall a television monitor sits on the floor, while high on the opposite side of each wall a television camera is mounted 111 inches [281.9 cm] above the floor. Each camera is angled downward to capture the image of a passing spectator and is connected by a cable to the monitor diagonally across from it. [...] [A]s one rounds the corner of the construction, the monitor at the end of the wall section ahead displays a momentary view of one's own back seeming to turn the next corner. The sensation is of chasing oneself from behind." (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 245)

<sup>29</sup> "For this piece, four walls define two twenty-inch-wide corridors that are joined at one end to form a V-shaped space. The interiors of the corridors are faced with acoustic material; the outside of each is left unfinished. As the viewer inches sideways through the narrow corridors toward the structure's apex, sound is increasingly dampened." (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 240)

<sup>30</sup> Sharp, "Two Interviews," p. 248.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Storr, "Flashing the Light in the Shadow of Doubt" in Morgan, *Nauman*, p. 159.

an effect of the erasure of the rift between the body and its image (that is, the body and mind), the rift which allows for symbolisation and narration, what you experience in these works is very difficult to describe (there is no way to narrate it). What is more, although what one of the critics said is true – that “you are asked to physicalize yourself in relation to the work”<sup>32</sup> – these works are also highly abstract, and therefore their impact comes from an unusual co-occurrence: one experiences strong physical sensations in the presence of an abstract image or situation (as, for instance, in the wedge).

The works I have discussed mainly use abstraction to cause the sensory deprivation and impoverishment that purify them of the symbolic and expressive ideas of the body, self, art, etc., all of which ideas are based on the humanist narrative drive that demands “action” (a coded sequence in and of time), which it is very difficult to suspend. The major trend in Nauman’s works up to this time had been to confound expectations, as another incarnation of narrativity (not to play with them, but to get rid of them), to destroy the impulse to get ahead of oneself by projecting the image. Both the urgency and risk involved in accomplishing this, as well as the extreme difficulty involved, are explicitly stated in Nauman’s *Flayed Earth Flayed Self (Skin Sink)*, which consists of a very spare installation<sup>33</sup> with an accompanying text, a part of which reads:

[...] (everything will feel the / same and it will not have a new meaning THIS / DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING ANYWAY) but now there / is either a greater density or less density / and if you turn back (when you turn back) / the change will be all around you. Now you / cannot leave or walk away. Has to do with your / ability to give up your control over space. This / is difficult because nothing will happen – and / later you will be no better or worse off for it. / This is more than one should require of another / person. THIS IS FAR TOO PRIVATE AND DANGEROUS / BECAUSE THERE IS NO ELATION NO PAIN NO KNOWLEDGE / AN INCREDIBLE RISK WITH (BECAUSE) NOTHING IS / LOST OR GAINED NOTHING TO CATCH OUT OF THE / CORNER OF YOUR EYE – YOU MAY THINK YOU FELT SOME- / THING BUT THAT’S NOT IT THAT’S NOT ANYTHING / YOU’RE ONLY HERE IN THE ROOM: / MY SECRET IS THAT I STAYED THE SAME FOR A SHORT TIME.<sup>34</sup>

Nothing could more precisely describe what Nauman’s work tries to accomplish. Nevertheless, some of the works of the 1960s and 70s have been given an “existentialist” interpretation, because they in a sense invite it – or should one say: the works make the critical (which is also narrative) automatism think twice and feel ill at ease? Works like *Live-Taped Video Corridor*, in

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<sup>32</sup> Brooks Adams, “The Nauman Phenomenon” in Morgan, *Nauman*, p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> “Nauman used six lengths of masking tape that radiate from the center of the gallery floor in a pinwheel pattern and continue up the walls, dividing the room into six equal parts.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 260)

<sup>34</sup> Simon, p. 260.

90 which the spectator in approaching his image simultaneously goes away from it, or *Going Around the Corner Piece*, where he sees himself only for a fleeting moment when he turns a corner – as if out of the corner of his eye – may produce interpretations concerned with the exposition of the true nature of the self, but the critic who proposes these interpretations must feel very uncomfortable with himself, because they remain unconvincingly at odds with the “clinical” precision and abstraction that the installations confront the spectator with. Nothing is there to be caught out of the corner of one’s eye: there is no hidden depth involved here into which our mind can plunge in search of some disembodied knowledge – everything is there exposed *on the surface* by means of a certain state of the body, achieved by resorting to simple technique, and all else is just the narrative weakness that wants to ablate that surface and create a symbolising-expressive rift which would pass for the image of spiritual depth.

*Flayed Earth* clearly expresses the necessity for a kind of experience which is difficult to achieve and which is too private and dangerous (cruel?), because it cannot be converted into a narration, whether it be a narrative of elation, pain or knowledge, an experience from which nothing is gained or lost, in which one only touches oneself, yet not as an individual “self” (self-identity is already a narration). This is the experience that cannot last, but which makes one touch one’s limit, when the image and the body dissolve in each other, opening one up to an experience of space and time which is the experience of the here and now.<sup>35</sup> Yet this is not the putative metaphysical experience of a timeless moment of presence above time given by means of a spiritual insight that leaves the wretched body behind, but an experience of time and space as the palpable stuff that constitutes one’s body, “spaciotime” as the obscure undifferentiated mass that my body is made of. What takes place here is the ecstatic experience in its etymological sense of going beyond oneself, or, to be more precise, to be oneself at one’s limit. We step into the realm of ecstatic art, which, contrary to popular opinion, is not the lax art of abandonment and excessive subjectivity, but, as we have seen, of precision and self-control. But as soon as we step into such territory, we step out of it.

*Flayed Earth Flayed Self* is a menacing title and, in a sense, it gestures towards matters of communal (ecological?) importance. This is not completely new in Nauman’s work. His *Yellow Room (Triangular)* is a triangular space with a door to it, illuminated with yellow fluorescent light, which brings discomfort to everybody who enters it.<sup>36</sup> Do not the closed circuit industrial cameras used in *Video Corridor* and *Around the Corner* take us into the terri-

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<sup>35</sup> See: Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. P. Connor, trans. P. Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>36</sup> Nauman wrote about it: “the room is very hard to stay inside of – I can’t stay very long myself.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 261)

tory of surveillance, where what one does is closely observed by the powers not favourably disposed to any independent action? We may multiply such examples we have already dealt with as critical hubris of depth production (narrative interpretation) which reduces experience to code. So, on the one hand, although most of Nauman's works created in the 1960s and early 70s can be treated as attempts to return to a body purified of discursive impulses and narrative props, hints of a utopian dimension to this project inescapably and persistently return precisely as the "polluting" surplus of social or existential narratives, however awkward the interpretations may appear. These social and existential implications get ever stronger as we go into the late 1970s, which seems to be a transitional period for Nauman.

This period of transition can be connected with what looks like an artistic crisis. After the flood of works from the mid-60s to the mid-70s (237 works in Nauman's "Catalogue Raisonné"), the second part of the 70s shows a radical curtailment of the creative impulse (37 works between 1975 and 1979). The beginning of the period is marked by the three works that rely most heavily on language in Nauman's entire oeuvre. These works are the already-mentioned *Flayed Earth Flayed Self* (1973), *Cones Cojones* (1973–1975), and, perhaps the most important of all, *The Consummate Mask of Rock* (1975). Each consists of an extremely minimalist visual gesture and a long text accompanying it. Visually, in the first two cases we have a spare masking tape pattern on the floor of a gallery<sup>37</sup>; in the third one – sixteen limestone cubes.<sup>38</sup> Yet the accompanying texts are anything but minimalist. First of all, they are inordinately long – and each one longer than the previous one. What is more, they are progressively more and more "frustrated." While *Flayed Earth Flayed Self* is still relatively "clinical" concerning human emotions (although, as I have already quoted, it refers to danger and "another person"), *Cones Cojones* goes a few steps further in emotional implications – its final lines are: "Oh, my shrinking, crawling skin / and the need within me to stretch myself to a point. / This accuracy is my intention. Placate my art."<sup>39</sup> But this is nothing in comparison with *The Consummate Mask of Rock*, which bluntly states its case from the very beginning:

1. This is my mask of fidelity to truth and life.
2. This is to cover the mask of pain and desire.
3. This is to mask the cover of need for human companionship.
4. This is to mask the cover.
5. This is to cover the mask.
6. This is the need of cover.

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<sup>37</sup> Pinwheel-shaped in the first case, concentric rings in the second.

<sup>38</sup> "The cubes were displayed in pairs (one block slightly smaller than the other in each) in a configuration that, depending on the viewer's perspective, forms a square or a diamond." (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 265) A pair consists of a fifteen inch cube and a fourteen inch cube.

<sup>39</sup> Simon, *Nauman*, p. 264.

7. This is the need of the mask.
8. This is the mask of cover of need.
- Nothing and no
9. No thing and no mask can cover the lack, alas.<sup>40</sup>

No work by Nauman up to that time had been so explicit about emotional (or as some would have it – existential) frustration at its origin and no later works are, either. Moreover, because one can retroactively see the way the text is embedded in Nauman's previous work with language, one can come to the conclusion that what has appeared as ironic and perhaps even light-hearted – for instance, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* and *Concrete Tape Recorder Piece*<sup>41</sup> – may actually have come out of the same kind of frustration on the part of the artist.

Although one can perhaps try to explain such surprising explicitness by means of artistic “weakness” caused by creative crisis and exhaustion, Nauman's tendency to abstract his concerns is still strong and surfaces in at least two ways. One is the already mentioned installation accompanying the text, which consists of pairs of cubes almost but not quite touching (one of the central concerns of the text is human companionship and the “we” which appears in the fifth section strongly suggests a couple<sup>42</sup>); the other is the “abstract” operations which the “poem” supposedly is the result of. Although the text consists of seven numbered sections (and the “moral”), in fact it can be divided into four “thematic” parts, of which the first three begin with enumeration of single words or phrases or clauses which later become juxtaposed, joined and shuffled around to combine in all kinds of ways. This is a technique Nauman had previously used in a more rudimentary form in some of his neon signs and prints. Sometimes it is just a sly play on words, like in RUN FROM FEAR/FUN FROM REAR, or the ominous anagram RAW WAR.<sup>43</sup> A more interesting, and also more abstract, operation is performed in the work PERFECT DOOR/PERFECT ODOR/PERFECT RODO (1972) in which the consecutive phrases become more and more abstract, that is, less and less comprehensible – a door may be perfect in a certain context; to classify

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<sup>40</sup> Simon, *Nauman*, p. 265.

<sup>41</sup> The work consists of a “tape recorder with a tape loop of a scream wrapped in a / plastic bag and cast into the center of a block of concrete / weight about 650 pounds or 240 kg” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 220).

<sup>42</sup> Cubes and rhombohedrons arranged in space, but without any accompanying texts, become the subject of a number of Nauman's works produced around this time and culminating in *Black Marble Under Yellow Light* of 1981 (X-shaped arrangement of two sizes of black marble cubes, illuminated from above by yellow fluorescent light). The thought process behind these highly forbidding abstract gestures can perhaps be seen in one of their titles: *Diamond Mind* (*Diamond Mind Circle of Tears Fallen All Around Me*).

<sup>43</sup> The neon installation executed in 1970 was preceded by a drawing of 1968, made at the height of Vietnam War, which was inscribed “sign to hang when there is a war on.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 248)



an odor as perfect does not make much sense; and “rodo” is a word which does not exist in English, so the phrase is meaningless.<sup>44</sup>

*The Consummate Mask of Rock* uses all kinds of combinatory and permutative devices in a text consisting of almost eight hundred words which deals with quite painful concerns (truth, pain, desire, exposure, human companionship) using constant reference to the children’s game “Rock, Paper, Scissors” (paper covers rock, scissors cut paper, rock breaks scissors).<sup>45</sup> The first thematic section consists of Part 1, which numbers and enumerates the terms to be combined (1. mask / 2. fidelity / 3. truth / 4. life / 5. cover, etc.), and Part 2, the beginning of which I have already quoted. In this part the three elements mentioned at the beginning are juxtaposed: truth/life (truth=life?), pain/desire (pain=desire?), human companionship. They become combined in statements and at first it seems we are dealing with a hierarchical structure, with the mask of fidelity to truth and life covering the mask of pain and desire covering the need for human companionship, which in turn covers the lack/nothingness, that is, the generic nothingness incarnated in a particular human being as the lack or abyss yawning at its core. Although in this structure there is nothing to cover and masking nothing is precisely infidelity to truth (“12. Nothing to cover / 13. This is the / 13. This is the mask to cover my infidelity to truth” [sic]), things become rather more complicated as the elements of the hierarchy are reshuffled. The result is that each of the elements gets in the way of another and it comes to seem that each one’s role is precisely to become an element which cuts (like scissors) or breaks (like rock) any possibility of one element being the cover of another:

14. This is the need for pain that contorts my mask conveying the message of truth and fidelity to life.
15. This is the truth that distorts my need for human companionship.
16. This is the distortion of truth masked by my painful need.
17. This is the mask of my painful need distressed by truth and human companionship.

Each element of the triad becomes a distortion in a relation to the other two: you cannot get from one element to the other in a straightforward manner (as is the case in a situation in which one element simply covers the other) but only through the third element which is precisely what distorts the simple relation of the other two. It is this convoluted pattern or vortex of distortions which incarnates the generic nothingness in the abyss of each personal lack. Although there is nothing to cover, the exposure of the way this noth-

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<sup>44</sup> Bruce Nauman, *Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words. Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 361.

<sup>45</sup> This “triad” also explains the necessity of an accompanying stone installation: the “poem” hanging on the wall is a typewritten collage made of paper cut up by scissors.



94 ing appears in the world (as the “personal” vortex of distortions) is lethal: “21. PEOPLE DIE OF EXPOSURE.”

The second thematic section continues with permutations of ever fewer elements<sup>46</sup> and these permutations occur in a more abstract way (if one compares them with the statements in Part 2, which were heavily loaded with emotions): “desire covers mask / need for human companionship masks desire / mask diminishes need for human companionship / need for human companionship diminishes cover / desire consumes human companionship / cover lacks desire.” This thematic section closes with Part 4 which is a bridge to Part 5 (devoted mostly to human companionship), but which also introduces an important statement in respect of Part 2: “THIS IS THE COVER THAT DESIRES THE MASK OF LACK THAT CONSUMES THE NEED FOR HUMAN COMPANIONSHIP.” The lack which in the logical sense might be originary is not so “in the world” – like the other elements (truth, desire, etc.), it is just a mask to cover some other “plane” of existence or break the covering of one “plane” by another.

As nothingness, an abstract philosophical category, is not originary, neither is the most sentimentally marked of the juxtaposed elements: the need for human companionship. The task of “proving” that it is not is performed in Part 5 by a kind of tongue-in-cheek “logic” of permutation and substitution which operates again on a number of enumerated elements:

1. some kind of fact
2. some kind of fiction
3. the way we behaved in the past
4. what we believe to be the case now
5. the consuming task of human companionship
6. the consumate mask of rock.<sup>47</sup>

Starting with statements like:

- (1.) Fiction erodes fact.
- (2.) Fact becomes the way we have behaved in the past.
- (3.) The way we have behaved in the past congeals into the consumate mask of rock.
- (4.) The way we have behaved in the past contributes to the consuming task of human companionship.

and emphasising especially the platitudinous:

- (5.) The consuming task of human comp. erodes the consumate mask of rock.

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<sup>46</sup> Seventeen elements in Part 1, only six in Part 3 (mask, cover, diminish, desire, need for human companionship, lack).

<sup>47</sup> Here and in the following quotations the incorrect spelling is Nauman’s. In fact, the title which appears in the original collaged “poem” is also misspelled: *The Consumate Mask of Rock*.

it arrives at a summarising claim: “THE CONSUMING TASK OF HUMAN COMPANIONSHIP IS FALSE.” In this section another set of three elements which get in each other’s way is also worked out. Truth/life, pain/desire and human companionship are replaced by truth, fact and falsity, or rather the latter two are the new incarnations of the former: human companionship is false and pain/desire is fact. “THE CONSUMATE MASK OF ROCK [fact] HAVING DRIVEN THE WEDGE OF DESIRE THAT DISTINGUISHED TRUTH AND FALSITY LIES COVERED BY PAPER.” So here we are with a man “so often taken to task,” the (ambiguous) task of human companionship:

2. (This young man, so often taken to task, now finds it his only sexual fulfillment.)

and for whom the gap between truth and falsity is “ever squeezing”:

6. This man, so often taken as a child, now uses his consumate mask of his rock to drive his wedge of his desire into his ever squeezing (his) gap between his truth, his falsity.

Thus the whole “poem” culminates in a horrifying vision of a fragmented and suffering man unable to desire his needs and capable only of masturbatory relief “lacking the task of human companionship,” which may be taken again as a kind of existential statement on Nauman’s part:

7. (This) man, (so often) taken as (a) child, finding his consumate mask of rock covered by paper, he finding his wedge being squeezed (from) between his desired truth (truth desired) and his desireless falsity (falsity desireless), he unable to arouse his satisfaction, he unable to desire his needs, he proceeds into the gap of his fulfillment his relief lacking the task of human companionship.

But are we dealing here with “existential condition”? Is the vision we are presented with ultimately tragic? In 1975 there was a strong tendency to interpret such statements in this direction, of which the most obvious example was perhaps the contemporary critical reaction to the works of Samuel Beckett. In Nauman’s case, however, the body expelled from the utopia of the 1960s will take a very different and quite “unexistential” form in his later work involving precisely the nexus of desire, falsity, satisfaction, impossible fulfilment and (lack of) human companionship which forms the core of *The Consummate Mask of Rock*.

A new wave of inspiration was to come with the beginning of 1980s and resulted from the overcoming of the abstracting impulse so strong in Nauman’s work up to then. But, typically for him, the overcoming is not done by “thinking about it” but by forcing it as far as it can go, or perhaps we may say to the point when it exhausts itself and starts to throw

96 up messages which are surprisingly “concrete.” After the intensely abstract works of the middle 1970s, such as *Forced Perspective I* (fifty-six rhomboid blocks arranged on the floor in a roughly rectangular space), and the abstract models for underground and outdoor spaces of the second part of the decade (another type of discomfiting spaces as sometimes even the title indicates, e.g. *Model for Outdoor Piece: Depression*), his works begin more and more to comment on contemporary culture and do so in an ever more straightforward way.

The unmediated commentary starts with a series of chairs suspended in awkward positions more or less at eye-level above the floor in a space limited by some geometric figure (e.g. *Diamond Africa with Chair Tuned DEAD*, *South America Circle*, *South America Triangle*), which refers to torture practices by various regimes. But neon tubing – which he had used from the very beginning of his career – became Nauman’s favourite medium to comment on his native culture (and thus on mediated global culture in general, as it is almost entirely Americanised). His early neon signs, as we have seen, were either abstracted (*My Last Name ...*) or – if they spelled any message – quite benign, although ironic (*The True Artist ...*). By the beginning of the 1980s, the abstraction and irony begin to leave this work. A kind of transitional moment can be seen in *Vices and Virtues*, where neon names of seven vices in italics are superimposed over seven virtues in roman, all of them in different bright colours, lighted in a complicated sequence that from time to time happens to illuminate both the virtue and the vice superimposed on it, which leads to all sorts of linguistic confusion: sometimes the word is unintelligible, sometimes a new word is created, or some old word can be elicited from the confusion of letters. For instance, the FAITH / LUST combination when lighted together can be read as FLAUTISH, or a word like FAUST can be elicited from such superimposition. The neon signs, working as representatives for the alluring mediated American mass culture of bright colours and simple messages with its black and white morality, get frustrated and keep throwing up confused or unintelligible messages-values, while the spectators, disentangling from the confusion words belonging to a clearly defined cultural past, pretend that everything is as it has always been and that their meaning has not changed.

But *Vices and Virtues* is still relatively abstract, if compared with other works by Nauman that become more and more involved in the media and the language of American mass culture he sees around him. It is not only colourful and simplified (typical features of neon), but also violent, loud, crude, rude, and, above all, obscene. The statements that begin to appear in his work are no longer mildly ironic such as “The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths,” but are more in the line of “PAY ATTENTION MOTHERFUCKERS”<sup>48</sup> (with a companion piece “PLEASE PAY ATTEN-

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<sup>48</sup> This work is not a neon sign, but a lithograph.

TION PLEASE”), which quite convincingly sum up what has been going on in the global village for the last half of a century. A lot of neon works from the 1980s are constructed this way – they are simplified, their message is clear, and they are far from being abstract or detached. They may take the form of superimposed short phrases (RUB IT ON / YOUR CHEST / STICK IT IN / YOUR EAR / MY FACE / AMERICAN / VIOLENCE) forming a kind of broken swastika, as in *American Violence*, or, as in *Sex and Death by Murder and Suicide*, of two human figures (female and male) engaging alternatively in killing each other (or themselves) and oral intercourse with a partner of the same sex.<sup>49</sup> Since these works are so basic and unadorned in their form, and so straightforwardly angry and obscene in their content, the reaction they elicit from the spectator is refusal (What is he trying to do to me?), which is not elicited when, as is usually the case in a standard Hollywood movie, people alternately kill and fuck each other. The defamiliarisation of an omnipresent medium (a neon sign saying: buy me, use me up, you won’t regret it), by taking its message to extremes, might – for a moment – bring panic and therefore activate resistance.

The most sophisticated as well as the most famous work by Nauman in this direction is a video installation of 1987 entitled *Clown Torture*, which returns to some typical motives and techniques of the artist, but which are used here to a radically different purpose.<sup>50</sup> One of the things we have come across is the looping of all the films that we are shown: the clown is “forced”

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<sup>49</sup> “In this work in red, orange, and pink neon animated by a complex electrical program, a male and female figure seen in outline stand facing each other. The figures gesture to each other, brandishing weapons (the woman holds a knife, the man a gun), and then turn the weapons on themselves. At one point in the program, seated and crouching figures are illuminated immediately in front of the standing figures (these new pairs forming same-sex couples) and engage in oral intercourse with them. As in other neon works of the same year, the eyes of the figures alternate between round forms and Xs [...], and the male figure’s penis alternates between erection and limpness.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 298)

<sup>50</sup> “For this video installation on three walls of a room, two smaller monitors (one upside down and one on its side) are mounted atop two larger monitors on pedestal bases set side by side against the far wall. Ceiling-mounted video projectors beam images onto the right and left flanking walls. The work’s four separate videotapes are projected on the walls or displayed on the monitors simultaneously and continuously. One of the videotapes (projected onto the left wall) contains a single sequence entitled ‘Clown Taking a Shit’ (in which a clown is seen sitting on a toilet in a public restroom as if viewed by a surveillance camera). The other three videotapes (displayed on the four monitors and the right wall) contain the following segments, arranged in a different order on each: ‘Clown with Goldfish’ (a clown balances a fishbowl on a pole against the ceiling until he tires and falls); ‘Clown with Water Bucket’ (a clown walks through a door and is doused by a bucket of water rigged above); ‘Pete and Repeat’ (a clown becomes increasingly frustrated as he recounts the story ‘Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence [...]’); and ‘No, No, No, No’ (a clown shouts ‘No’ in various intonations). [...] Some of the images were recorded with the camera on its side; they thus appear vertical on the sideways monitor and horizontal on the upright monitors, adding to the general confusion of orientations and sounds.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 297)

98 to repeat his tricks over and over again. Another familiar situation is the surveillance (this time unashamed, in earlier works only implied) of the clown defecating in a public lavatory. The difference seems to be that it is the clown who is the protagonist of the work, not the spectator or the artist. But is this the case?

For the first time the figure of a clown appears in Nauman's neon works in the middle of the 1980s, together with obscene sex and violence (e.g. *Mean Clown Welcome*) and this obviously is not a coincidence. Nauman himself comments:

I got interested in the idea of the clown first of all because there is a mask, and it becomes an abstracted idea of a person. It's not anyone in particular, see, it's just an idea of a person. And for this reason, because clowns are abstract in some sense, they become very disconcerting.<sup>51</sup>

We have met with abstraction in relation to the human figure or its signs in the earlier work as a means of "purification" of a narrative element, but clown's abstraction is of a completely different order. The abstraction that had to do with the artist's, performer's or spectator's body aimed – as I was trying to show – at the experience of one's body as something more than the image, as the productive force that experiences itself as it touches its limits and finds there the materiality of spirit. One may awkwardly call it materialist transcendence.

The clown is abstract because he is nobody in particular (he does not have a face), yet the situation is far more extreme than that, because he has *no body* either. Normal considerations for persons, as for instance compassion, do not apply to clowns, because all the degrading and painful things that happen to them on stage do not make them suffer. In this way their physicality is erased and the public laughs rather than becomes horrified. But Nauman's aim is to pervert that convention. On the one hand, he forces his clown into the body, making him defecate in front of the public (symbolically, the most physical of acts), and at the same time, by means of infinite repetition of supposedly "funny" actions performed by the clown, he demonstrates how nonsensically cruel they are (one does not have to infer it – on one of the screens it is the clown himself who screams No! No! No!). Yet the work is also obviously not a comment on clowns. Being a kind of continuation of the violent and obscene neon figures of the 1980s, as well as the video performances of earlier years, it is not only frustrating, but is itself the product of frustration. The wished-for ecstatic body has disappeared from the horizon of culture (including art) and one can now see what double it left in its place – the abstracted body of the spectator experienced by means of the media circuit. And whether we see here the image of a mass culture hero (the artist) or of his fan makes no difference whatsoever, because both

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<sup>51</sup> Nauman in Joan Simon, "Breaking the Silence" in Morgan, *Nauman*, p. 283.

of them have their meaning only as *consumers* (an idol is important for a fan only as the image representing the fan's inflated powers to consume). It is the consumer who is nobody in particular (ads speak to all) and whose body is only a simplified stick figure body fit for everybody. The abstracting process is strictly reversed here: it no longer means purification from narratives, but exactly its opposite, purification of everything but narratives – there is a model for my body and the means of using it, which is produced for me as my desire. In the figurative neon signs, excellently trained abstract (reduced) bodies perform mechanised activities answering to the incentive which is at the same time the command: “Don't be the subject of your desires, just satisfy them, right now.”<sup>52</sup> A stick figure is trained to have an erection when shown specific rudimentary signs, and since these few signs keep flashing everywhere, there is no time to lose. While in earlier works by Nauman, withdrawal of information (deprivation) and abstraction led to a certain mental and sensory opening which we called ecstasy (overload), one can say that in a mediatised world deprivation (simplification) is the effect of the overload of one type of simple information. It is true that everybody becomes an expert in the world of series: this was an eventuality Benjamin reluctantly applauded in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” but what he did not see was that its source is the serial production of desire models, with which his project of research into the social unconscious ceases to make much sense because serially produced desire is in no position to be repressed, since within the limits of the media everything is possible and anything that is produced can be immediately satisfied with no apparent consequences.

There are consequences, however, although they may not be apparent. While in Nauman's neons the mediatic desire and its satisfaction are merely shown as crude and mechanised, *Clown Torture* presents us with a certain forced haemorrhage from the mediatic vessel. As in the media, the one looked at is a perfect image of the onlooker, so they constitute a self-sufficient system of mirrors (the one on the screen is interesting to the one watching just because he is on the screen, and the relation of adulation is perfectly emptied of content – reversing places would automatically make the onlooker interesting), the repeated “entertainment” performed by the clown is not only juxtaposed with (and so compared to) something as “distasteful” as defecation (not the process itself but being witness to it<sup>53</sup>), but the clown himself, as if a part of him had escaped from the self-mirroring machine, comments on what he goes through by screaming No! No! No! What he finally perceives is that the repetitive mechanised entertainment in fact constitutes torture, and what is more, a torture which is bound to be repeated infinitely with no hope of abating, because it is no longer rec-

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<sup>52</sup> Jean-Charles Masséra, “Dance with the Law” in Morgan, *Nauman*, p. 178.

<sup>53</sup> A “prophetic” work if we consider the future of TV as exemplified in the Big Brother type of reality show.

100 ognised as torture by the serially produced empty subject of desires. The stick body of the consumer has finally been gloriously and completely emancipated<sup>54</sup> and with it what passes for consumer experience. (Nauman's work comments: there is no more human sexual experience, only *Human Sexual Experience*<sup>55</sup>). Yet the emancipation that takes place here is from the ecstatic body – which is the only site of experience that does not reproduce any codes, but is the source for them – into the repetitive image of mass produced mechanised stick figure that is fed into the mediatic machine of reproduction and circulates there with no respite. What Baudrillard called ecstasy is actually torture.<sup>56</sup>

What makes *Clown Torture* even more interesting (or inevitable?) is that, to a large extent, it works by means of mirroring the mechanism it tries to expose. The flood of information provided by the four separate repetitive “stories” replete with screaming and crashing sounds (apart from the rather quiet “Clown Taking a Shit”) leads to a kind of overload of the accommodative abilities of the spectator, which results either in immediate refusal to watch it further (the “what is he trying to do to me?” reaction again), that is, resistance, or to a state of horrified petrification in the face of its dumb circularity. However, such “transport” does not take place in the “aesthetic” state of detachment – the work is far too violent, rude and noisy for the spectator to master the confusion he is subjected to and its experience becomes *excruciating*. Thus the clown's torture eventually turns out to be the *spectator's* torture. Yet it is the clown who screams No! No! No! So where are we? Who is mirroring whom? Who is the clown? Whence comes the torture? And how can it stop?

*Clown Torture* can be considered the most violent work of Nauman's entire career and it is the most refined culmination of his engagement with physical and cultural violence in the 1980s.<sup>57</sup> Therefore it is perhaps surprising that this work has a kind of companion piece which uses the same media and is structured in a very similar way, but whose effect is, as it were, the reverse of *Clown Torture*. The installation, shown for the first time in 1991 and by many considered to be Nauman's most brilliant work, is called *Anthro/Socio*, and like *Clown Torture*, it is a distillation of all kinds of gestures Nauman had used thus far in his artistic practice. It also consists of stacked monitors (three pairs) and wall projections (three), but this time all the images present us with the head of the same man (some right side up,

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<sup>54</sup> Masséra, “Dance with the Law,” p. 175.

<sup>55</sup> “In this animated neon work, the pointer finger of a blue hand moves in and out of the circle formed by the thumb and pointer finger of a yellow hand, which also moves back and forth.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 296)

<sup>56</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988).

<sup>57</sup> Although in 1986 Nauman created a video installation called *Violent Incident* in which a man and a woman actually engage in violent actions against each other, for reasons enumerated above (harassment of the viewer is perhaps the most important one) I consider *Clown Torture* much more effective, its more abstract quality notwithstanding.



some upside down) who repeatedly chants three phrases “Feed Me / Eat Me / Anthropology,” “Help Me / Hurt Me / Sociology,” and “Feed Me / Help Me / Eat Me / Hurt Me.” The videos of the chanting face (the performance artist Rinde Eckert) are not synchronised, so at any given moment we have a choir of voices played at high volume which add up to a veritable dirge of the impossible generic example of an exposed human being stripped of all the neon gloss of consumption and narrative (“eat me,” “hurt me” sound like desperate pleas for contact and mercy, not invitations). This effect is perhaps reinforced by Eckert’s head being completely shaved and therefore appearing “naked” as well as by the high volume of voices which “flay” us and send shivers down our spines.<sup>58</sup>

The way to this work can be easily traced by looking at Nauman’s work of the 1980s. First, this is the decade in which he returns to neon signs. I have already noted the “violent” use of the medium, but apart from that, there is a more “abstracted” strain here creating a tangential line which relates to the violence that is explicitly present in his other works but does so in a more subdued manner. The technique for such subduing is the use of commonplace as a disarming device, as in the signs *Knows Doesn’t Know*<sup>59</sup> and *Life, Death, Love, Hate, Pleasure, Pain* (both 1983).<sup>60</sup> This line culminates in the dazzling neon installation *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984), which, in a sense, exhausts the possibilities of the medium in one brilliant gesture, which covers (*pars pro toto*) all basic human activities, represented in brilliant colours in a hyperreal consumer universe, by employing fifty exemplary words, most of them simple verbs, which are joined to two basic verbs of existence, “live” and “die.”<sup>61</sup> The meaning of the commonplace, already used in smaller neons like the ones mentioned above, comes here to

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<sup>58</sup> This is the first version of the work called *Anthro/Socio (Rinde Facing Camera)* and shown in 1991. The following year, at “Documenta 9” in Kassel, Nauman showed a more “dynamic” variant of the work, *Anthro/Socio (Rinde Spinning)*, in which Eckert’s head revolves as he turns in an unseen swivel chair and consists of six video monitors and six (not three, as in the previous version) wall projections.

<sup>59</sup> “This X-shaped piece reads KNOWS DOESN’T KNOW along one of its axes and CARES DOESN’T CARE along the other. Alternate verbs are set above and below the verbs of these phrases: MATTERS and CARE along the first axis, KNOWS and MATTER along the second. The words, which occur in italic or roman letters, are made of parallel lengths of neon tubing and are presented in variously paired colors.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 286)

<sup>60</sup> “The words of the title are presented, alternately in roman and italic capital letters, in a circular formation. Each word is composed of double-lined letters in two colors.” (Simon, p. 287)

<sup>61</sup> “This billboard-size work in multicoloured neon displays what Nauman calls ‘lists of human attributes and action.’ One hundred three-word commands – all ending in either LIVE or DIE – are written in two superimposed layers of variously colored neon. The individual phrases, arranged in four vertical columns, are programmed to flash on and off in complex patterns. Each of the often violent imperatives has its opposite adjacent to it in the next column: LOVE AND DIE – LOVE AND LIVE; HATE AND DIE – HATE AND LIVE; FUCK AND DIE – FUCK AND LIVE.” (Simon, *Nauman*, pp. 290–291)



102 the fore precisely as the frustrating and meaningless element which flashes brightly in the hyperreal mediatic circuit but is devoid of any kind of signification or consequence. A similar idea is even more interestingly applied in a video installation of the following year entitled *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985), in which two actors, a man and a woman, appearing in close-up on two separate monitors, recite a litany of simple attributes and activities (a hundred sentences in all) getting more and more frustrated as they go along.<sup>62</sup> The metaphor of the hyperreal neon sign is, in a sense, literalised here: what we are watching is television (still the most representative and time-absorbing of the media) whose very existence relies on infinite reproduction in various possible registers of the simple conventional narratives the actors of *Good Boy Bad Boy* enumerate, however frustrating and meaningless they (we) may find them. Both actors recite the same text but because they do it in different styles and at different speeds their message is hardly ever synchronised; yet because it is nevertheless the same, we never have the feeling of a cacophony of voices (unlike in *Clown Torture*), but of a strange kind of reinforcement which only amplifies the frustration we are witnessing.

*Anthro/Socio* is only a step beyond *Good Boy Bad Boy*. On the side of the message we have a radical curtailment: the two actors are reduced to one who, moreover, is not asked to act (to represent conventional human emotions is TV business) but to just recite or chant a list of most basic human relations. On the side of form the installation is much more complicated (and, hence, abstracted): six monitors and three (*Rinde Facing Camera*) or six (*Rinde Spin-*

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<sup>62</sup> “[T]his work [...] consists of two videotapes played simultaneously on two monitors set on pedestals approximately forty-five inches high and separated by a distance of two to ten feet. One monitor displays a woman, the other, a man. Both are seen against a dark background with their upper bodies or just their faces filling the screen, and both recite the following speech:

I was a good boy/You were a good boy/We were good boys/That was good/I was a good girl/You were a good girl/We were good girls/That was good/I was a bad boy/You were a bad boy/We were bad boys/That was bad/I was a bad girl/You were a bad girl/We were bad girls/That was bad/I am a virtuous man/You are a virtuous man/We are virtuous men/This is virtue/I am a virtuous woman/You are a virtuous woman/We are virtuous women/This is virtue/I am an evil man/You are an evil man/We are evil men/This is evil/I am an evil woman/You are an evil woman/We are evil women/This is evil/I'm alive/You're alive/We're alive/This is our life/I live the good life/You live the good life/We live the good life/This is the good life/I have work/You have work/We have work/This is work/I play/You play/We play/This is play/I'm having fun/You're having fun/We're having fun/This is fun/I'm bored/You're bored/We're bored/Life is boring/I'm boring/You're boring/We're boring/This is boring/I have sex/You have sex/We have sex/This is sex/I love/You love/We love/This is our love/I hate/You hate/We hate/This is hating/I like to eat/You like to eat/We like to eat/This is eating/I like to drink/You like to drink/We like to drink/This is drinking/I like to shit/You like to shit/We like to shit/This is shitting/I piss/You piss/We piss/This is piss/I like to sleep/You like to sleep/We like to sleep/Sleep well/I pay/You pay/We pay/This is payment/I don't want to die/You don't want to die/We don't want to die/This is fear of death.” (Simon, *Nauman*, p. 295)

ning) wall projections emitting the same number of voices which have to be coordinated into a non-synchronised choir, which results in an overwhelming experience (totally unlike TV, although “screen-induced”).

Unlike *Clown Torture*, which is purposefully chaotic and disconcerting in order to overload our perception and cause panic, *Anthro/Socio*, although it uses the same media and the same high volume of sound, is, paradoxically, a rather “meditative” piece. That is, asynchronous images and voices, perhaps because the latter repeatedly return to the same simple one-syllable messages, add up to create some kind of tightly structured aural cocoon in which we hover alone, wrapped in sounds, even if there are other people present in the gallery, and this “apartness” is reinforced rather than destroyed by the high volume, because it drowns out all other sounds. Such a meditative mood seems to take over in Nauman’s video works as we get further into the 1990s and then into the 2000s.

In *Falls, Pratfalls and Sleights of Hand* (1993) the “existential” opposites “live” and “die” and “axiological” ones “good” and “bad” (which turn out not to be so oppositional after all) are radically abstracted. This work consists of five looped wall projections (some in slow motion) showing the eponymous actions. On one screen a woman seated on a chair, which then folds beneath her, is filmed from below through a transparent floor onto which she collapses hovering above the camera. On another screen a man slips on a banana skin and falls in an exaggerated manner (an obvious clown reference). On three other screens we have close-ups of sleights of hand: hands performing card tricks, hands performing a vanishing trick with a small ball, hands forming balloon animals. All this is accompanied by ambient electronic sounds which add to the hypnotic effect of these repetitive concrete actions whose mechanical qualities (both the falling and the performing of manual tricks) become abstracted into a subtle poetic surface (the videos of hands are tinted, each with a dominant colour), which suggests a somehow menacing undercurrent (mechanicity – dehumanisation, etc.).

Another “meditative” work which even more explicitly picks up on Nauman’s earlier experiments is *World Peace* of 1996, once again consisting of five looped wall-projections arranged on three walls.<sup>63</sup> The images projected are this time of people of different races and both sexes shown from different angles and from different distances (from American shot to close-up) who recite variations on two simple verbs: “I’ll talk to you. You’ll listen to me. You’ll talk to me. I’ll listen to you. They’ll talk to you. You’ll listen to them. I’ll talk to them. They’ll listen to me,” and so on. We are no longer on the basic “existential” level of “help me/hurt me” but neither are we in the frustrating televised commonplace narratives (*Good Boy Bad Boy*). Although the message repeated is obviously commonplace

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<sup>63</sup> This is the version called *World Peace (Projected)*. There is another one, called *World Peace (Received)* in which the videos are shown on five TV monitors surrounding the viewer’s seat from three sides.

104 and is repeated by the actors in very different ways with varying intensity and frustration (there is even a woman who performs in sign language), all these various inflections mirror the emotions that a communicative situation can cause in each of us. In other words, *World Peace* is a kind of quiet and more discursive *Anthro/Socio* (the sound volume is lower in the former) which, having been switched from an existential to a social level, makes for a statement that is perhaps more formally varied but also more melancholy than “flaying.”

The entire “meditative” line culminates in a work which is on the one hand very simple, but on the other brings to an unexpected fulfilment many different strains in Nauman’s oeuvre. In this work, after a hiatus of more than thirty years Nauman returns to his studio (in the meantime he had moved from California to New Mexico) in order to record activities which take place there and turn them into art. We analysed earlier the works which brought him recognition in the 1960s in which he used his body as a kind of instrument to structure experience and the way he replaced his body with other possibilities, but this time the trick is even weirder because in the work there is neither the artist nor a performer, nor even is the viewer made to perform. Moreover, in the very title of the work we encounter the word which has been anathema to Nauman thus far: *Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage)*. Chance has always been an element the artist distrusted, although he himself cites Cage, the high priest of chance, as an important influence.<sup>64</sup> This time, however, chance becomes the structuring principle of the work which is a great example of the way the everyday can be transformed into a rather strange experience which it is difficult to put into words.<sup>65</sup> Nauman speaks about the genesis of the work thus:

So a year or so ago I found myself going in the studio and just being frustrated that I didn’t have any new ideas to work on. What triggered this piece were the mice. We had a big influx of field mice that summer, in the house and in the studio. They were everywhere and impossible to get rid of. They were so plentiful even the cat was getting bored with them. [...] So I was sitting around the studio being frustrated because I didn’t have any new ideas and I decided that you just have to work with what you’ve got. What I had was this cat and the mice and I did have a video camera in the studio that happened to have infrared capability. So I set it up and turned it on at night when I wasn’t there, just to see what I’d get.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Nauman, *Please Pay Attention*, p. 400.

<sup>65</sup> Although the work’s title refers to Cage and in this sense it is a kind of homage, it is a “perverse” homage which is indicated by the first part of the “subtitle” (*Fat Chance*). Unlike Cage, for whom chance was the core of the work, Nauman takes the chance situation as a starting point which is then extracted from its “natural” place, transformed and installed in a constricting environment.

<sup>66</sup> Nauman, *Please Pay Attention*, p. 389.

In order to map the studio Nauman placed the camera in seven different locations and recorded the space for an hour each night on forty-two nights from August to December. Then he edited the tapes, making them into seven projections which last about five hours and forty-five minutes each. There are two basic versions of this work *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)* and *Mapping the Studio II (Fat Chance John Cage)*. The first is just the “raw” version of the recording from the infrared camera presenting the seven different locations on all four walls of a gallery room (which means that at least one projection takes place behind your back as you watch the others). In the second version, the grey images are tinted and they progressively change colour from red to green to blue and back to red. The changes are not synchronised and they take place very slowly (15 to 20 minutes between consecutive colours), which means that the change is noticed only retroactively and not in real time. “To keep the eye engaged,” as Nauman says, the images are also “flip-flopped” horizontally (left becomes right) and vertically (upside down) also non-synchronously at intervals of about 15 minutes. On the screen we see scattered impedimenta from the artist’s earlier works, two doors leading outside and into other parts of the building and from time to time flying insects, scampering mice or the cat which prowls about the studio. There are also sounds coming from the outside, the sounds of a New Mexico night: barking dogs and howling coyotes from time to time.

The first obvious association, already mentioned, is with Nauman’s filmed performances in the studio. This time, however, art is not what the artist does in the studio (a familiar commonplace strategy by Nauman), because he is absent and his place is taken over by inert scraps left over from earlier work (“failed” art) which do not suggest any ideas and we become frustrated (like Nauman in his studio) because “nothing happens.” After a while, however, we start to notice that “nothing happens” is perhaps not the best description as “nature” or “the outside” keeps penetrating into the art’s “sanctuary”: we hear the sounds of the night, and the insects, mice and cat come and go. These bring with them the familiar “narrative weakness” whose material is cultural clichés. In other words, because they are these particular breeds of animals (cat and mouse), they bring with them suspense connected with expectations of struggle and violence set in an appropriately menacing background of nondescript sounds of the night – a kind of minimal reward for our patience or perhaps even a bigger, self-congratulatory one (how clever we are!), if we allow ourselves a facile interpretation which turns the cat into an artist chasing inspiration (the muse) in his studio.<sup>67</sup> But expectations of even this rudimentary narrative get frustrated because the cat does not want to become what we take it to be; it is evidently bored with the rodents and seems not to notice the

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<sup>67</sup> Nauman, *Please Pay Attention*, p. 401.

106 existing possibilities of exhilaration. The ambiguous space of the artist's studio (outside/inside, art/nature) once again fails to become colonised by the viewers' consciousness.

What, therefore, is the point of this evidently "superficial" (meaningless events) and "boring" (not only non-narrative, but also mute) work? Nauman himself makes an interesting remark about the piece:

Because the projection image is fairly large, if you try and concentrate on or pay attention to a particular spot in the image, you'll miss something. So you really have to not pay attention and not concentrate and allow your peripheral vision to work. You tend to get more if you just scan without seeking. You have to become passive, I think.<sup>68</sup>

The experience, however, goes further than that, because not paying attention to any particular fragment of the projections results after a while in a heightened state of floating attention which the word "passive" does not describe too well as it is a kind of different type of concentration and therefore an oxymoronic passive activity. Moreover, what we encounter here is a new variation on Nauman's familiar strategy of deprivation, which paradoxically results in a new experience which adds something to our awareness of ourselves. In *Mapping the Studio* we are placed in another kind of constricting environment – this time it is not physical constriction, as for instance in Nauman's corridors, but an environment in which sensory data are scarce. Because the "volume" of experience is "turned down," we gradually have to turn our sensory apparatus up (our everyday life takes place in circumstances which are so "overloaded" that our sensory abilities have to be kept to a minimum for the sake of self-preservation) and over a longer period of time we become aware of this new state when we register with ever-increasing clarity and precision the movements and sounds of insects, mice and the cat as they move about at different speeds through the studio.<sup>69</sup> Because any sound or movement itself becomes a *sensory event* when such a meditative state is achieved, all narratives (cat vs. mouse, etc.) recede from the mind and are no longer of interest. In fact, they are precisely the "cultural" obstacle to achieving such a state of floating attention because they serve as the fake narrative amplification of everyday experience: a narrative is a way to provide a string of conventionalised gestures (like the ones enumerated in *One Hundred Live and Die*) with fake depth ("meaning"). And here perhaps we can find an explanation for why many of Nauman's works for some unspecified reason and in spite of their rawness, repetitiveness

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<sup>68</sup> Nauman, *Please Pay Attention*, p. 402.

<sup>69</sup> I can provide an example from my experience of the work (*Mapping the Studio II*): I had been watching the projections for quite a while (perhaps an hour and a half) with one of them behind my back (they were projected on all four walls) when I started to "register" (I hesitate to use the word "notice") movement on the screen behind my back which I didn't actually see.

and sometimes an almost clinically “cold” atmosphere bear a strange poetic aura – they strip the event of everything but its surface and this surface, the obvious itself, unmoored from the conventional narrative ballast, resurfaces in all its haunting dark radiance. 107



## The Essential (Political) Appendix: On Art, Garbage and Matters of the Canon

From the position of the so-called “politics of difference” – including that of multiculturalists, feminists, queer theorists, etc. – the notion of the western canon, that is, its prevalence in the syllabuses, is attacked mainly on grounds that may be called legalistic. Drawing a parallel between the legal system and cultural politics, these critics argue that since in all democratic countries citizens are formally equal and have the right to be represented by appropriate forums (e.g. the parliament), all identities should also be treated as formally equal and have the right to be represented (e.g. in the reading list). It has been claimed that because citizens should be treated as equal, not only should their identities also be acknowledged as such, but that – since there is no neutral standard of evaluation – the social practices and artefacts such identities create should be treated as equal too. In other words, these practices should not be evaluated as being better or worse when compared with other identities or cultures. This attitude is presented as the only way to build a society full of respect (all identities should be treated with equal deference) and tolerance. By familiarising themselves with works presenting the point of view of a given identity, other identities will understand it better, which will lead to more tolerant attitudes.

The opposing view can be best summarised in an epigram ascribed to Saul Bellow: “When the Zulus produce a Tolstoy we will read him.”<sup>1</sup> This view blatantly asserts the supremacy of the (western) canon: a book by Tolstoy is held to be objectively a much more valuable cultural product than, for instance, a Zulu myth; or a Beethoven quartet must be considered more refined than banging the drum, however complicated the rhythm of the latter. In other words, the Zulus may be nice people, but they have not produced anything worth reading by somebody who is not a specialist in Zulu culture. We are not inclined to read the Zulus, because we do not find much

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 42. Taylor remarks that he has no idea whether Bellow really made this remark.



110 interest in what they write about – their literature or art in general may be important to them, but is not to anyone else, while our canon is of universal interest, as the admiration for Shakespeare for instance around the world is supposed to show.

So, from one point of view, we have the denial of Dead White European Males as the standard against which other cultures should be measured: this standard is perceived as not neutral but oppressive, because it is founded on identifications that denigrate the Other (western culture with its traditional associations: white as an angel, black as a devil, etc.). From the other perspective, this standard is presented as the only working measure of excellence (both moral and formal), which simultaneously always finds other cultures wanting (a characteristic verdict is pronounced by E.M. Forster in *A Passage to India*: Mediterranean culture is order, Indian culture, in spite of its seniority, is muddle).

The conflict we are discussing is a conflict of identities and therefore of values – which means that it is undoubtedly a political conflict. But in this context a question arises: even if art cannot escape promulgating values, that is, identities, is art primarily a species of political activity? In other words, although we can agree that in some way everything, including art, is political, we may ask ourselves whether everything in culture should be *politicised* in a simple way. Although art, in a more or less open manner, always voices political positions, can or should it be reduced to its political message in the wider sense of values presented in it? This problem is, of course, as old as political criticism – one need only recall Marx's problem with ancient Greek tragedy: although it necessarily expressed the values of the society long dead and gone (relations of production based on slavery, etc.), he freely admitted that it none the less moved him.

If we look at our problem from this angle, the uncanny identity of the positions of the adversaries in the debate will clearly appear. Both perceive art (and the canon) as conducive to or destructive of formation of a certain identity, whether this identity be feminist, gay, black, Muslim, Eurocentrist, etc. or any hybrid of them. Minority groups demand the inclusion in the syllabus of texts in which they can recognise their own values, while the dominant group wants to prevent the purity of their identity from being diluted or soiled, in the name of maintaining "standards."

A thousand and one activities, however, can be conducive to a given group identity formation, activities much more popular than art, and therefore of greater significance for the group. To provide an example: gay pornography may be good for gay identity:

Having been reared in the bosom of Jesus, it happened that I never saw gay porn until I began graduate school. I had had sex with men for years on the side, but I didn't think I was gay. I thought I was just wicked. The first porn images I saw, in a magazine belonging to a friend, set me suddenly to think, "I could be gay." Why did those pictures trigger my recognition when the

years of sleeping with men somehow didn't? It's because the men in the pictures were not only doing what I wanted to do, they were doing it with a witness: the camera. Or rather, a world of witness, including the infrastructure for producing, distributing, selling, and consuming these texts. This whole world could be concretised in places like Christopher Street or Times Square, but also in a formal language of pornography. In order for the porn to exist, not only did some of its producers have to have gay sex, they and many others had to acknowledge that they were having it. What is traded in pornographic commerce is not just speech, privately consumed. It is publicly certifiable recognition. This is part of the meaning of every piece of porn, and what is difficult to communicate in the dominant culture is that the publicity of porn has profoundly different meanings for nonnormative sex practices. When it comes to resources of recognition, queers do not begin on a level playing field.<sup>2</sup>

This argument about the form of recognition due to a minority group can generally be applied (*mutatis mutandis*) to all groups demanding recognition for their identity and it is also used in the battle for the reform of syllabuses. What, however, makes such arguments applicable to the everyday public sphere (e.g. against outlawing pornography, etc.) but misses the point as far as syllabuses are concerned? Obviously, not a moral point that pornography is bad as such, because, for instance, it commodifies the human body. Neither can it be the aesthetic claim that pornography in itself belongs to the regions of low culture, and is not refined enough to be admitted into the canon, because pornography *can* become canonical, as the example of Sade shows. Therefore, to make it more concrete, our consideration of the uses and abuses of the canon can be reformulated in an exemplary manner: what makes for the canonicity of Sade's pornography and what does gay pornography as presented above lack?

The first thing to note is that Sade's writing does not aim at recognition at all. It is not directed at the reader who would recognise his own image in the text, whether it be an actual or an ideal one – its aim is precisely the reverse of that: to shake the foundations of the reader's identity, of *every* reader's identity. Sade addresses his text to everybody, not to some imagined libertines who could recognise their hyperbolised image in his work. This *universal* address, however, has nothing to do with what is usually criticised as the fake universality of Man but is, in fact, the discursively neutralised image of the values of western European middle classes. Sade addresses everybody, but only to wreak havoc with their identity. In his writing all established values are painstakingly dissected and dissolved, yet not in order to produce a chaotic vertigo of destruction (which would be something akin to dadaist babble, yet devoid of its vaudeville appeal), but rather to create a new kind of reader, to produce a space for him in a dimension of the impossible beyond

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Warner, "Zones of Privacy," in *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed. Judith Butler et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 102–103.

112 the confines of conceivable reality (for Sade, it is a place where the more a victim is tortured, the more beautiful she becomes). This is not done by placing the familiar 18th century subject within a rational or irrational utopia and presenting the consequences in conventional language. In order to realise his attempt to “say it all,” Sade invents a new variety of French, which displaces the reading subject from the position he has learned to assume, the position his cultural identity identified as the one to take with respect to the text he reads. And this is why reading Sade is ultimately not much fun, in contrast to the jubilant but insipid pleasure of recognising oneself in gay porn or any other identity-enhancing discourse. One cannot experience reading Sade as pleasure precisely because one *cannot* identify with his protagonists, and this is also why his texts are not exciting or sexually stimulating; they are rather the opposite. In a certain sense they are boring; but with precisely the same boredom which Sade demands from his libertines: the climax of Sadean experience is an apathetic state in which the torturer performs the torture, yet – contrary to what is usually imagined as Sadean ideal – does not derive any pleasure from what he does. He performs his activity not for his own pleasure but for the sake of showing, making happen a dimension of the impossible, a dimension in which the cause and effect rules of nature become suspended, a dimension which from the point of view of causality is impossible, but which nevertheless appears.<sup>3</sup>

What we encounter here is a difference which Kierkegaard, in a different context, tried to describe by distinguishing between reminiscence and repetition. Reminiscence is the Socratic scene of reading where you try to identify the truth of who you already and “really” are – to acknowledge yourself as gay in the spectacle with which you identify, or to acknowledge yourself as British in certain traits of character or behaviour which British culture presents as essentially British, etc. In this sense, the notion of reminiscence summarises the whole identity formation logic, whether multiculturalist or Eurocentric. In contrast to this, what constitutes the core of repetition is an encounter with a traumatic event that comes from the outside and which hits you at the very centre of your identity. Kierkegaard’s prime example here is, of course, faith. Faith does not obey the logic of cause and effect because one can never be argued into belief; it is always a blind leap beyond one’s conscious control. Yet the image we encounter here is not the gentrified one which is usually circulated as something good for one’s identity, morality, “humanity” and digestion, but faith at its most traumatic and therefore amoral, inhuman and un stomachable, which we encounter in God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice his son or in the story of Job.<sup>4</sup> The point is, of course,

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<sup>3</sup> One should not imagine such beyond as “mystical” but just as a realm in which laws that we consider as “natural” or “rational” are suspended. In other words, it is the realm in which our “common sense” is no longer at home. Sade’s ideal is, of course, the crime so great that it interrupts the eternal return of Nature to itself, of its cyclical generation and disintegration.

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 212.

that although ultimately Abraham did not have to kill Isaac and prosperity was returned to Job, they did not come out of their experiences as the same men. In a sense, Abraham did kill his son, because he took the conscious decision to do it and in doing that he had to kill the very kernel of his identity, because for him his son stood for the highest good. Abraham did the impossible (within his horizon of values) and, in order to be able to do it, he had to destroy his identity. Therefore, after the fact, he enters a new dispensation: he has to rebuild his identity again from scratch.

The effects of the difference between two understandings of what should be included in the canon (identity enhancing vs. identity dissolving) can also be illustrated by referring to the difference between two orientations in psychoanalysis: the dominant American ego-psychology and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The main aim of the former is also a kind of “recognition” – it is directed at the strengthening of the ego in order to produce a strong “autonomous” identity. As in our example of gay pornography, knowing what you want and who you are is supposed to boost your self-respect and therefore make your life better. For Lacan, however, every ego is the effect of misrecognition. As he presents it in his famous essay, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,”<sup>5</sup> the child jubilantly identifies with its image in the mirror (its ideal ego) but this is a false identification – the child identifies itself as whole while in fact it is not in control of itself. After birth, the child at first experiences itself as painful chaos, finds it impossible to coordinate itself, so when it sees its image in the mirror it experiences the narcissistic delusion of mastery. The problem with such ideal identification (as with every militant identity) is that it results in aggression vented at everything that disturbs it, and since the identification is false and because of that will never be more than imaginary (nobody is ever a hundred percent gay, English or “ethnic”; the very reflexive presence of such categories in the mind of their users testifies to their distance in respect of them), ultimately any other identity is perceived as a threat to this identification. Therefore one will always blame one’s relative “shortage” of identity on others (other identities), because they are experienced as getting in the way of one’s identification. They “steal” the enjoyment of identity that rightfully belongs to me: while I always feel “out of sync” with my ideal ego, others seem to me to wallow in their, for instance, ethnic “substance” – eating their strange (disgusting) food, cultivating their strange (enervating) habits, etc. Taking it to the academic level, one can be sure that the “ethnic” will claim that he cannot form his proper identity (strong ego) because he has to internalise works which are at odds with his values, while the “Eurocentrist” will complain that he is not able to “catch up” with his proper self, because he is forced to study or teach works that do not live up to western standards.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 75–81.

114      Aggression both against the canon and against replacement of the canon has the same logic, a logic which is based on the feeling of horror experienced on finding out that there is in each of us something which does not allow us to become ourselves, that there is some foreign body inside us that prevents our coinciding with our image – in short: something that Hegel called negativity and which is universal for humanity, at least in its modern form. And it is precisely here that great art is located: in the void within the subject which separates the subject from itself.

To present this problem from a different perspective, it is easy to notice that the more a work relies on identity the sooner it becomes dated. Those passages of Dickens, for instance, with which his contemporaries identified the most (and such identification went all the way: they cried abundantly, men and women alike, when they read the descriptions of deaths of his child characters<sup>6</sup>) are for us completely unreadable – the reaction may be laughter, but more often embarrassment. What is still alive (“canonical”) in Dickens are both his most haunting, that is, “fantastic” images (e.g. Miss Havisham’s wedding party room)<sup>7</sup> and, and chiefly, his eccentrics and those villains whose singularity comes mostly from their specific ways of using language – in this, they denaturalise the realist decorum: they come out not as psychological “identities” but rather as anomalies of discourse.

This is why attempts at “political” (which is ultimately “moral”) disciplining of the canon will never accomplish their aim: whether it be Zhdanovian, religious, multiculturalist or any other kind of censorship, it will always evaluate works of art according to the identities they identify, and therefore some will be praised as enhancing a particular kind of self (Catholic, Islamic, communist, etc.) while others condemned as perverting it. Additionally, another rather popular practice, which is the other side of the same coin of identification, can be used: a supposed critique of a given identity will be conducted on the level of values – for instance, feminists writers employing perfectly phallogentric language will rewrite “canonical” plots from the feminist perspective in order to “criticise” the phallogentrism of the original, etc.

What marks the canonical is, however, an attempt at the dissolution of identity. And because an identity rests on the imaginary identification with a discourse, it can be undermined by another discursive practice. This is why authors like Céline, Pound or Eliot can be considered canonical while most of the contemporary politically correct authors can only be made into sectarian obligatory reading: as is the case with gay pornography, which can be of interest only to gays, such works can be found interesting only by a given “sect” (feminist, Afro-American, Eurocentrist, etc.), because they aim at pro-

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<sup>6</sup> Characteristically those and other “heart-felt” passages are often written by Dickens in a kind of fake blank verse, which makes them even more ludicrous for the contemporary reader.

<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps characteristic that Miss Havisham is precisely another character with which it is impossible to identify because of her extremity.

ducing an idealised image in it (the idealised image may also be the image of the idealised victim), and since other groups' (dominant or not) affects are not invested in these images, members of such groups will find them either simply boring (irrelevant) or ridiculous.

In contrast to that, Sade's pornography, or pornology as Deleuze calls it, like the political pornology of e.g. Céline, do not primarily operate on the level of ideas (identities to identify with) with which we are presented or which are contested, but attempt to dissolve us as readers with stable identities (e.g. stable reading habits). In order to displace our liberal-tolerant identity (also an effect of self-congratulatory misrecognition), their main strategy is to create, by inventing a new variety of discourse, a linguistic space beyond all identifications that have been so far possible in the language. By engaging in such a literary experience we find that we are more (or other) than our identity, more (or other) than the image with which we have identified so far. During such traumatic experiences we do not dissolve into chaos (we do not lose language, we do not become autistic) but find out who we are, that is, we discover that we truly are this gap in ourselves which allows us to turn into somebody else; in other words, that *we are free* – what Rimbaud expressed by writing "I am the Other." Stating it yet another way: a space beyond the possible/nameable appears, which is also the space of the (im)possibility of myself – and this is the space which does not belong to my identity. I encounter my identification as a contingent creation of language, which an encounter with a truly new discourse puts into perspective, that is, presents as *identité manquée*, as false identification. An antagonism that never allows us to become ourselves asserts its rights primarily in language because it is language itself that is the scene of our sticking out of ourselves: something that simultaneously is us (we express our identity in language) and is a foreign body in us (language is transindividual, something that comes to us from outside).

A number of works in the western canon can be treated as universal in the above sense, because they put the expression of negativity in language at the centre of attention. We owe the theoretical formulation of the foregoing premises to Romantic authors who abandoned the model of ancient Greece and claimed that the perfect work of art proper to modern times had yet to be created, so in them the canonical consciousness became consciousness for-itself. Yet as in-itself this consciousness had been present since at least the beginning of modernity. Despite all avowed attempts at reminiscence, in the sense of emulating what was claimed to be the unsurpassable perfection of the ancients, as the achievements of, among others, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and Goethe show, repetition (the "traumatic" use of language) has become what counts as the measure of the canonical. Hence it is rightly said that Romanticism puts art in the place of God and establishes the aesthetic as a religion – this religion is the proper heir of the traumatic God of Abraham.



116      Therefore the root of what some present as the priceless gem of western cultural identity, to be defended against the onslaught of barbarity (e.g. popular culture), turns out to be a nothing, the empty place of a lack of identification. This nothingness at the core has always resulted in the ferocious attack which western identity mounts against itself. In other words, what both multiculturalists and Eurocentrists are not prepared to tackle is the fact that *what makes the work canonical is its successful attack on the canon*. So, paradoxically, there was a grain of truth in Eliot's seemingly mandarin concept of tradition: although in general he could serve as the arch-example of the Eurocentrist identity (his pathetic identification with Virgil, etc.), his emphasis on the impersonality (escape from identity) of great works cuts close to the bone. This relinquishing of identity, however, does not result, as Eliot asserted, from the identification with "the mind of Europe – the mind of his own country – a mind which [an artist] learns to be much more important than his own private mind."<sup>8</sup> What is more important than "his own private mind" for the artist is not an identity greater than his own, which is still an identity nevertheless ("the mind of Europe"), but the lack of identity, a lack that he or she can put to work to bring "the mind of Europe" or tradition into question.

One might even go further and claim that every work worth calling canonical is written in a language that is largely incomprehensible to its contemporaries, yet because of this it bores into their habits of perception and makes them uneasy because its primary effect is to make the impossible shine through the work, to open up the space of the unnameable. After their encounter with the trauma of such a work, the critics start to mend the hole it has torn in our habits with their interpretations. That is, they try to weave the new work into the tapestry of culture, to tell us "what it means," and to a greater or lesser extent they most often succeed, but every work worth its canonical status, if reapproached carefully, retains some traumatic material which resists gentrification. Even in very "identity-bound" authors, as the example of Dickens has shown, such places can be found, and they are what make for the experience of art.

My belief is, therefore, that you cannot contest the canon in a stronger way than by the strategy the canon uses against itself and this is precisely what identity politics activists, whether hegemonic or not, do not want to see. Instead they adopt the position of a hysteric: they behave as if they contested the Master (the canon, the "establishment") but such contestation is not contestation at all because it simply takes the shape of bombarding the Master (who is thus acknowledged as the Master) with demands – with demands that *he do the work for them*. In other words, rather than create a work that would forcibly shake the foundations of the canon, that would *displace* the works

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<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Twentieth Century Poetry: Critical Essays and Documents*, eds. Graham Martin and P.N. Furbank (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1975), p. 81.

they find questionable, oppressive or disgusting, they call for police activity to lock away things that are unpleasant from their particular standpoint.

The artists to whom this book has been devoted are often treated as “difficult” or “elitist” precisely because they are properly *confrontational* and not hysterical in the above sense. They identify with no image because they cannot find a place for themselves in the language of their art. The refusal to create such imaginary identification makes their works an attack on language (language as the tool that produces identities). They plough through it and wreak havoc with signification, they disorganise language as a space of figures that make possible domination (yet another name for identification). And the effect is unmistakable: an impossible (atopic) dimension shines through in its uncanny splendour. But there is nothing nice about this dimension, it is neither beautiful nor comradely, it is not a place in which to engage in affirmative action. It provides for a painful and excruciating experience, like every transforming event: to experience what it is to *create* is like finding oneself at a great altitude without an oxygen tank. If a language is to stand up against the prehistory of oppression, which has to be primarily incarnated in the very form of the language itself, nothing pleasant can be expected from it. Only by putting it into convulsions can the unimaginable shine through.





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Sławomir Mastoń

**Wyrazić oczywistość:  
Celan – Beckett – Nauman**

Streszczenie

Głównym celem pracy jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, czym mogą być literatura i sztuka *dzisiaj*, a co się z tym wiąże – również krytyczne odniesienie do starego jak nowoczesność problemu końca sztuki wysokiej. Wychodząc z założenia, że mówienie o końcu sztuki jest uzasadnione, tylko jeśli rozumiemy ją jako prezentację tego, co idealne, w formie uchwytniej dla zmysłów, w pracy próbowano spojrzeć na rolę twórczości i krytyki w naszym świecie, który nie jest już światem Idei w sensie heglowskim. Jako że dyskusja *stricte* teoretyczna w takim przypadku nie zawsze prowadzi do uchwytnych wniosków, autor zaproponował rozważenie wyżej wspomnianych problemów, posiłkując się przykładami dzieł Paula Celana, Samuela Becketta i Bruce’a Naumana, których praktyka pozwala, jego zdaniem, na sformułowanie pewnych szerszych wniosków dotyczących sensu tworzenia w epoce zwanej często post-postmodernistyczną.

Książkę, której wcześniejsze rozdziały poświęcone były rozważaniom na dość abstrakcyjnym poziomie, kończy polityczny apendyks, sytuujący wcześniej omawiane problemy sztuki „elitarnej” i „trudnej” w kontekście postulatów polityki tożsamościowej, a w szczególności dyskusji o sensowności kanonu czy też jego represyjności.



Sławomir Maślōń

## **Die Offensichtigkeit ausdrücken: Celan – Beckett – Nauman**

### **Zusammenfassung**

Das Hauptziel der vorliegenden Arbeit ist, die Frage zu beantworten, was Literatur und Kunst heutzutage bedeuten können. Der Verfasser möchte auch dem wie die Modernität alten und das Ende der Hochkunst betreffenden Problem kritisch gegenüberstehen. Von der Annahme ausgehend, dass die Erwartung des Hochkulturstendes nur dann berechtigt ist, wenn die Hochkunst als eine Darstellung von einem Idealen und für unsere Sinne Wahrnehmbaren betrachtet wird, versucht er, der Rolle des künstlerischen Schaffens und der Kritik in unserer Welt, die schon keine hegelianische Ideenwelt ist, auf den Grund zu gehen. Die eine rein theoretische Diskussion in dem Fall nicht immer zu greifbaren Schlüssen führt, entscheidet sich der Verfasser, oben genannte Probleme am Beispiel der Werke von Paul Celan, Samuel Beckett und Bruce Nauman zu ergründen. Er ist zwar der Meinung, dass ihre Praxis erlaubt, allgemeinere Schlüsse über den Sinn des künstlerischen Schaffens in der oft postmodernistisch genannten Epoche zu ziehen.

Das Buch, Essen einzelne Kapitel den ziemlich abstrakten Betrachtungen gewidmet wurden, endet mit einem politischen Appendix, in dem der Verfasser die früher angesprochenen Probleme der „elitären“ und „schwierigen“ Kunst im Kontext der Forderungen der Identitätspolitik, und besonders der Diskussion über den Sinn oder die Repression des Kanons bespricht.



Executive Editor  
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Cover Designer  
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Computer-generated forms  
Bogusław Chruściński

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ISSN 0208-6336  
ISBN 978-83-226-2087-8

Published by  
**Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego**  
**ul. Bankowa 12B, 40-007 Katowice**  
[www.wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl](http://www.wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl)  
e-mail: [wydawus@us.edu.pl](mailto:wydawus@us.edu.pl)

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First impression. Printed sheets: 8,0. Publishing sheets:  
9,0. Paper: offset. grade III, 90 g

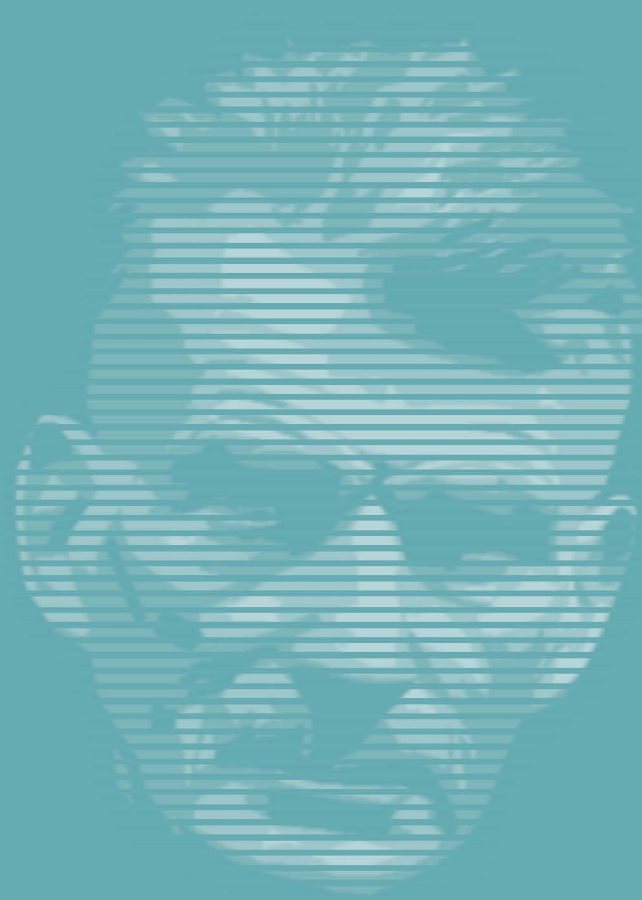
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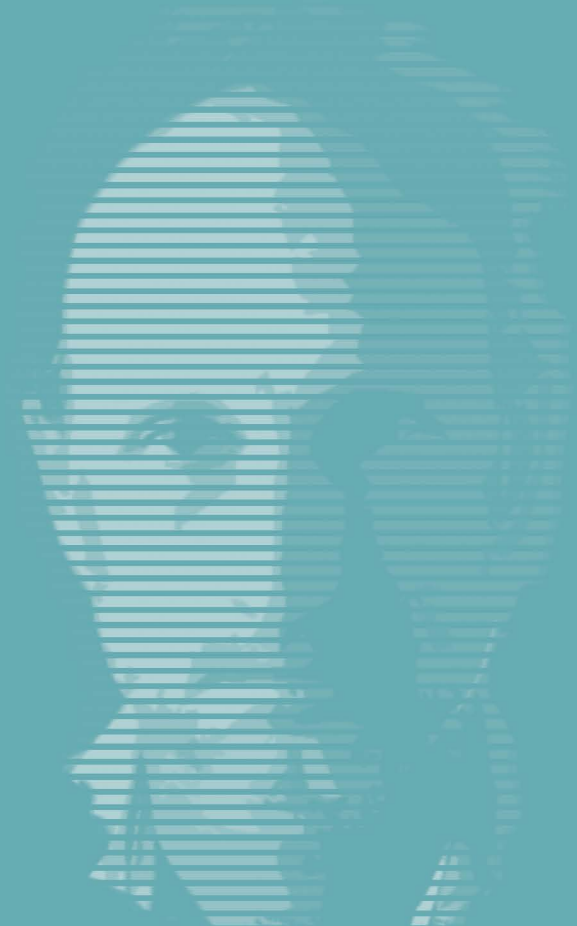
Printing and binding: PPHU TOTEM s.c.  
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